The Ethics of Social Media and the Mental Health Crisis

Carla Ioana Ana Maria Popescu

Student Faculty of Philosophy, University of Bucharest, Romania
carlisfilm@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This essay explores the ethical considerations surrounding the use of social media platforms and their detrimental impact on mental health. With the proliferation of social media in today's interconnected world, it is crucial to critically examine the ethical implications of these platforms. The essay delves into the various ways in which social media can contribute to the mental health crisis, such as through increased exposure to cyberbullying, unrealistic body image standards, and constant social comparison. By analyzing the role of social media companies in the dissemination of harmful content and the potential ethical responsibilities they bear, this essay provides insights into the moral obligations of platform owners and the need for stricter regulations. By comprehensively analyzing the ethical dimensions of social media's impact on mental health, this essay aims to foster a broader conversation and inspire action for a more responsible and compassionate digital future.

KEYWORDS: Ethics of social media, Applied ethics, Social media, Mental health, Addiction

Introduction

Social media platforms have the power to amplify both positive and negative aspects of human behavior. Unfortunately, the negative consequences often take center stage, with cyberbullying, body image issues, and social comparison playing significant roles in damaging mental health. These phenomena raise ethical questions about the role of social media companies in perpetuating or mitigating these harmful effects. The issue which I am raising sounds slightly superficial, doesn't it? Because we are surrounded and so connected to what happens online. However, I believe it is time to become aware about the implications of social media, the psychological factors which keep us addicted and begin to develop healthier relationships with these platforms.

The usage of social media

It is no mystery that most people see social media as a necessity, similarly as we are seeing food, water, etc. Certainly, our usage of social media has become an integral part of our lives, with billions of people navigating on the internet daily. However, the question of whether our usage of social media is moral raises important ethical considerations. First of all, social media does have a massive potential for positive impact. It makes it possible to connect with our loved ones, from family to friends, it enables us to share ideas and raise awareness about important causes. Platforms can be used to promote social justice, to militate for inclusivity and to amplify marginalized voices. Unquestionably, social media allows many individuals and organizations to not only improve their status and position, but to bring a change of perspectives to a broader audience. On the other side of the spectrum, we can state that the ethical challenges of social media are apparent. The spread of misinformation, cyberbullying, invasion of privacy and the addictive nature of these platforms raise concerns about the negative consequences of our usage. Social media can undeniably fuel negative behaviors, promote comparison and envy, and contribute to mental health issues.

Taking all of that into consideration, it is clear that our usage of social media is moral only if we take charge on how we navigate certain challenges and what we allow ourselves to indulge into.

It is our responsibility as individuals to exercise critical thinking, fact-check information, and promote respectful dialogue. By practicing digital empathy and kindness, we can contribute to a more ethical online environment. Likewise, holding social media platforms accountable for their policies, addressing algorithmic biases, and reducing harmful content is crucial.

The identity crisis

The internet seems more attractive to the younger audience, starting from kids to young adults. How harmful can a few hours online be and what effects are most people experiencing as a result of online activities?

Social media affects the young population and because it is not as visible as an actual weapon, which comes across immediately as an imminent danger, we perhaps tend to be more permissive and overlook certain concerning factors. Being exposed to all sorts of content, it is nearly impossible for the younger audience not to compare themselves and to feel inferior. Children and teenagers are more prone to develop depression or anxiety or even body image issues because of the way social media is constructed, 64% of teenagers experience depression because of the time spent online.

The prefrontal cortex, which is in charge of regulating our thoughts, impulses, actions and emotions, fully develops at around 23-25 years old. Until we reach that point in our lifetime, we are constantly growing both physically and mentally, so isn't it wrong when you do not have a clear image of yourself, of who you are and who you want to become, to be stimulated by so much information, one more fabricated than the other?

With the alarming rise in mental health issues, society should be increasingly calling for stricter regulations and oversight of social media platforms. Ethical debates center around the need for legislation that holds these companies accountable for their impact on mental health, ensuring transparency, algorithmic fairness, and user protection. Striking the right balance between innovations and safeguarding human well-being becomes an essential ethical challenge.

Being present in the moment. Are we the most lonely we have been?

Social media is an incredible and powerful tool when it comes to connecting with people worldwide, however it has also contributed with certain negative aspects, one of them being the feelings of loneliness in individuals. At this state of time, we certainly have formed more superficial connections than real and genuine ones, because they come handy and easy. While social media allows us to maintain connections with a broad number of people, most of these connections often lack depth and substance. Interpersonal interactions might resume to likes, comments or a mere emoji, with the effect of leaving individuals craving for more meaningful connections, looking for them in the same environment and all of it summing up to a small but dangerous vicious cycle.

Because of the nature of social media, face-to-face interactions have substantially reduced, especially over the past couple of years. Indulging in a more comfortable way of "socializing," I actually believe that does more harm than good in most cases. Constantly engaging with screens instead of interacting in person can hinder the development of genuine connections and emotional support networks. If most of our lives are spent through a screen, aren't we missing out on living? We, as humans, are meant to speak to one another, relate to one another, and have empathy and strong connections with other individuals. Are we perhaps slowly losing touch with the actual reality?

Another issue that I would like to raise is the online vs offline personas. People often present idealized versions of themselves on social media, carefully curating their content and showcasing only the positive aspects of their lives. This can lead to feelings of loneliness as individuals may believe they are the only ones struggling or experiencing difficulties. Feeling

like they do not belong because they are different, because nobody else seems to be honest and truthful about their lives and struggles. We, as a society, have normalized showcasing the best of the best on the internet and leaving out the truth which so many people should be aware of, that all humans are struggling, some more than others, but life is never and can never be perfect. There is a need for imperfections in order for us to have an idea of what perfection may be, there is a need for certain moments to not be as glorious in order for us to be able to enjoy to the fullest the outstanding and remarkable personal wins and moments throughout our lives. We lack transparency and honesty when it comes to the content that is put out on the internet.

The most concerning part is when we understand that we feel lonely even when we are surrounded by other human beings, because we have disconnected from what actual socializing is or should be.

Social media and dopamine - are we addicted?

Dopamine is a type of neurotransmitter, a chemical substance that transmits signals between nerve cells in the brain. It plays a crucial role in various brain functions, including movement, motivation, reward, and pleasure. Dopamine is associated with the brain's reward system and is often linked to feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, and reinforcement of certain behaviors. Additionally, it has roles in regulating mood, attention, learning, and sleep. Dopamine is linked to activities which we enjoy, so automatically, it is present in our online dependence.

The process is easy to understand, but incredibly hard to combat - every single time we get a notification, a like, a comment, or any sort of attention, the brain receives a flood of dopamine. So every time we engage in any online activity, the dopamine level increases. The same levels of dopamine can be gained by doing a meditation or going for a walk or for a run, but in these cases we get the reward after completing them, so after a longer period of time. Because of the way social media was created, the reward comes not instantly, but much faster. We can analyze a couple of emblematic examples in order to be able to capture the essence of this issue. When movies started playing on TV, we were incredibly excited, however there were ads so when certain platforms such as Netflix appeared, people were able to get dopamine faster. Now we can compare Netflix with TikTok. After a movie, which can have 2 hours, we get rewarded with dopamine but in the case of TikTok, we get dopamine after every single video on the explore page. How can the young audience not be addicted to this platform? Imagine getting a dopamine flood, and another one, and another one and so on, every 30 seconds. Some individuals treat the internet as an escape from reality, the more they use certain platforms, and they start to feel a magnetic attraction towards this easy fix.

Is it effective and realistic to talk in such instances about a social media detox, or rather, a technology detox? Is it achievable and attainable? The most alarming issue is that because of our habits, our lives would not be as enjoyable and easy without our phones and laptops. No music, no internet, no social media, no easy way to gain dopamine.

Ethical solutions also lie in empowering users with knowledge and skills to navigate social media responsibly. Education initiatives that promote media literacy, critical thinking, and emotional resilience can empower individuals to recognize and address the negative impacts of social media on mental health. By encouraging self-regulation and responsible digital citizenship, we can create a more ethically conscious online community.

Our usage of social media is a complex issue with moral implications. While it has the potential for positive impact, it also presents ethical challenges. By being mindful of our actions, promoting empathy, and advocating for responsible practices, we can strive to make our usage of social media more moral and beneficial for ourselves and society as a whole. Awareness is the first step towards addressing the ethical quandary surrounding social media. Understanding the psychological factors that contribute to our addiction to these platforms is

crucial. By recognizing the persuasive design techniques, such as infinite scrolling and notifications, we can begin to regain control over our online behavior.

Conclusion

Perhaps I shall end this article by asking all the readers: Should we not start to analyze the core of the issue at hand - what happened to our "real" life and why the most satisfying part of it shall be online? At what point in time have we stopped living and started simply existing? Why did we slowly lose the joy of the small things and why have not we noticed it yet? Why is it so normal to be active and have an account on social media? Do we want to be seen, heard, praised? But at what cost?

To develop healthier relationships with social media, we must prioritize self-care and set boundaries. Taking regular breaks, setting time limits, and engaging in offline activities can help us strike a balance between our virtual and real lives. Being mindful of the content we consume and curating our online experiences to promote positivity and well-being is also essential.

Furthermore, fostering open conversations about mental health and the impact of social media is vital. By sharing our experiences and supporting one another, we can create a culture of empathy and understanding. Encouraging platforms to provide more mental health resources, helplines, and access to professionals can also be a significant step towards addressing the mental health crisis exacerbated by social media. Ultimately, it is up to us as individuals, as well as society as a whole, to navigate the ethical challenges of social media. By recognizing the potential harm, educating ourselves, and advocating for changes in policies and regulations, we can shape a future where social media platforms prioritize mental well-being and ethical practices. Let us embrace technology with awareness, compassion, and a commitment to fostering a healthier digital landscape for all.

References

Boyd, Danah. 2015. "Social Media: A Phenomenon to be Analyzed." *Social Media + Society – SAGE Journals,* April-June 2015: 1–2. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305115580148. Accessed on November 1st 2023.

Catapano, Peter, and Simon Critchley (Editors). 2018. *Modern Ethics in 77 Arguments: A Stone Reader*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). 2023. "The Teen Brain: 7 Things to Know." Available at https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-7-things-to-know. Accessed on november 1st 2023.