

The Debate on Social Media Ethicality: How Social Media Affects Consumers and Marketing,
Who is Responsible for Malpractice, and How to Approach the Social Media Dilemma

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Abstract

This research project will study social media usage and its positive and negative aspects, considering how social media positively impacts businesses and how it negatively impacts consumers. This approaches the ethicality of social media marketing and attempts to determine if using and taking information from users is ethical using personal experience to test whether social media strategies work. This study will weigh the pros and cons of social media, testing to find the best way to use social media to amplify its positives and mitigate its negatives, and concluding who is responsible for the damage done by malpractice.

Keywords: Social media, impact, marketing, consumers

The Debate on Social Media Ethicality: How Social Media Affects Consumers and Marketing, Who is Responsible for Malpractice, and How to Approach the Social Media Dilemma

As social media is becoming a universal tool, there seems to be a growing debate as to whether social media is being used for its original purpose or if its purpose and use are being changed by the public and by the executives at technology companies. There seem to be many different factors that affect social media and its usage and how it impacts individual consumers and our society. Throughout this thesis, the researcher hopes to examine factors that play into what social media is today and the consequences of social media usage. Throughout this paper, the researcher will cover information ranging from social media history and social media in marketing to how social media affects consumers mentally and if the information collection method is ethical. In this thesis, the writer will utilize modern research to examine whether current social media practices are ethical for both marketers and consumers and draw conclusions regarding responsibility for moral consequences.

Positives of Social Media for Marketing Purposes

Social media practitioners can observe how social media has positively impacted the marketing industry. The use of social media has changed the way marketers can communicate with customers. To accurately understand the positive aspects of social media, one must first understand how social media has advanced marketing practices and allowed for easy access to targeted consumers. Social media is a new and growing group of platforms for companies to express their business ventures and marketing plans. These platforms are becoming the best way to communicate information and brand and market a company (Wixted, n.d.).

Before social media usage, companies relied strictly on traditional marketing tactics such as newspaper articles, magazine stories, radio show advertisements, and television commercials to advocate for their company and share advertisements to publicize their company or content to society. There seems to be an obvious advantage to using social media as an advertising opportunity or marketing platform. Still, to truly understand the extent of this advantage, researchers must evaluate and understand past advertising and marketing practices and compare the results to the current feedback given by social media advertising campaigns.

Marketing is a word that is often used to describe countless promotional tactics within the business world. This is why Todor (2016) says, “marketing is everything a company does to place its product or services in the hands of potential customers” (para. 1). Marketing is the way that companies reach their audiences and advocate for their products and services. It includes different types of media to communicate a message about the company and why its audience should use its products or be interested in its message. The history of marketing dates to early periods, but many scholars seem to think this is not very important. In *Blind Spots in the Origin of Marketing*, Edwards (2020) explains:

Marketing is theorized to have originated at the dawn of *exchange* itself, the beginning of trade between parties that began between 7000 and 9000 years ago. However, few scholarly articles explore the history of marketing beyond this cursory recitation of the commonly accepted origin story of the field. An exploration and explanation of what the marketing function was in ancient times, and how it has evolved since, is left largely to the imagination. (p. 161)

The commonality that researchers seem to agree on is that there was probably marketing before the 20th century; however, this marketing was not as influential as current marketing tactics

today. These ancient forms of marketing looked different than today's marketing. F.K. Beard (2017) agrees; in his writing, *The Ancient History of Advertising*, he contends:

Many historians date the dawn of modern advertising and branding to the beginning of the 20th century, and they tend to fixate on the philosophies and practices of the period's American pioneers...any earlier history largely is irrelevant when it comes to gaining a deeper understanding of the institution and business of advertising. (p. 239)

As said above, the knowledge of advertising prior to the 20th century is typically irrelevant and not needed for marketing today. As culture changes, marketing and advertising strategies must adapt alongside. Change has been seen in marketing and advertising through the adoption and furtherance of digital advertising techniques and social media in exchange for, or in addition to, traditional marketing tactics.

Traditional Marketing

In the recent past, when social media platforms did not exist, advertisers and marketers were given fewer opportunities to engage with their viewers or audience actively. Marketers and advertising teams were limited to traditional advertising tactics, the only tools available before the invention and implementation of internet and social media advertisement sharing. Marketing teams had limited availability to share advertisements and receive a response from their customers directly. To see a clear understanding of traditional marketing tactics, we must understand this:

Traditional advertising is an interruptive form of marketing that allows companies and marketers to reach out to consumers wherever and whenever they wish to. It can occur in many different forms, including newspaper ads, magazine ads, billboards, radio ads, television ads, and direct mailings. Traditional marketers push their marketing messages

in front of many people, regardless of whether or not they are interested in the messages.
(Hsu, 2021, para. 3)

Traditional advertising is a valuable part of marketing when it comes to displaying information to a large sector of people. There is one story written, one graphic designed, or one advertising campaign run, and it is presented to every viewer in the same format, not catering to the individual viewer. There is one story given to a wide variety of viewers, and the company hopes to persuade the audience members to use their products or support their company by whatever means presented in the advertisement. This short presentation of information causes traditional marketing to be more of an interruptive type of marketing where viewers find themselves caught up in the advertisement while doing something else. These types of campaigns are typically strictly focused on selling the product, not particularly focusing on entertaining or involving the audience, which does not allow advertisements to cater to the interests of the individual viewers. The one story is shared and hopefully received by enough of the audience members to make the advertisement a successful run.

Before researching, it may be assumed that because of the lack of social media availability at this time, traditional advertising styles are less effective and are not as valuable for today's market of advertisements. However, Lance Bettencourt (2019) claims that "the results make it clear that traditional advertising remains a critical ingredient in company success. It has a direct and indirect positive impact on customer acquisition and brand equity" (para. 11). This study focused on the trend of companies moving their marketing spending to a more social media and content marketing approach and attempted to fill the gap of research regarding how social media and content marketing effect brand-building metrics and customer involvement, compared to the use of traditional marketing tactics. In contrast to previous thoughts and

assumptions about this subject matter regarding traditional marketing, this study seems to think that traditional marketing still plays an influential, critical role in the atmosphere of marketing and advertising.

Traditional marketing is a useful type of advertising because it does focus on a single goal or outreach. Todor (2016) explains that “there are many facets of traditional marketing, and examples might include tangible items such as business cards, print ads in newspapers or magazines. It can also include posters, commercials on TV and radio, billboards and brochures” (para. 38). Therefore, it still encompasses many useful means of marketing. By using traditional marketing, companies still attract customers. Todor continues to explain that traditional marketing’s number one advantage is that it is trusted. Individuals that have used these forms of media become loyal to the provider but also tend to see traditional advertisements as trustworthy since they are produced on a large scale. Another advantage is that they are unavoidable. While some practitioners believe traditional marketing tactics are outdated, many consumers still look at magazines, read newspapers, watch television, and listen to the radio while driving their cars. Those watching cable television will still have commercial breaks during shows and movies, and even if they put the volume on mute, they will still see the film of the commercial on the screen. Streaming services, like Hulu or Netflix, offer premium ad-free memberships, while still offering lower-cost memberships that include advertisements. Even while driving one’s car, whether on Spotify or the radio, these advertisements will be heard and unavoidable if the user desires to stay on the channel. This makes this tactic beneficial because users cannot skip over the commercial block and must listen to the advertisement unless they remove themselves from the track or skip the page quickly.

The disadvantages of traditional marketing are also worth noting. Todor (2016) posits, “segments of the market can be targeted, but not an individual. For example, an ad may target young women. In comparison, digital marketing techniques can track a viewer's fields of interest and suggest similar products” (para. 46). Traditional marketing cannot target a particular niche of people. It cannot send advertisements directly to the exact audience it wants to focus on; instead, it must settle on a broader focus group.

Digital Marketing

To dive deeper into group connection and to produce content that will be directly sent to the specified target audience, digital marketing was created. Todor (2016) defines digital marketing as:

Digital marketing is a blanket term for the targeted, measurable, and interactive marketing of goods or services using digital technologies in order to reach and convert leads into customers and preserve them. The main objective is to promote brands, shape preferences, and boost sales through several digital marketing techniques. (para. 5)

Digital marketing allows creatives to market to their audience online. This can be done through advertisements on the web, pop-ups, and commercials. In an article by Dwivedi (2021), it was found that “according to recent statistics for January 2020, 4.54 billion people are active internet users, encompassing 59% of the global population” (para. 1). This means that more than half of the global population are using the internet consistently. As marketers, it is vital to go where target clients already are. Since a large population of people is avid in internet use, it is essential for marketers to take advantage of this access to potential clients. In the success that digital marketing has had, marketers have looked for ways to personalize their digital marketing tactics

better to specifically reach their target audiences. Digital marketing has led to the creation and usage of social media.

Social Media in Marketing

Social media is an up-and-coming tool of communication that allows advertisers and marketers to directly target their audience and deliver content to explain their products and brands to the exact consumers who would use the product and brand. Social media is an ever-growing institution. In *Social Media in Marketing*, Alalwan (2017) explains, “increasingly, social media are largely considered by modern business as promising platforms to conduct the promotional activities as to effectively communicate with the targeted customers” (p. 1177). Where companies in the past would simply have a marketing team, companies are now becoming more aware of the need for social media experts. As the world transitions into a more social-media-involved style of marketing and advertising, the capabilities of direct advertising become a significant player in the game. The way that companies market to their consumers has changed from being a broad-focused, “reach as many people as you can” approach and has been more focused on direct clientele. Dwivedi (2021) commented, “organizations have responded to this change in consumer behavior by making digital and social media an essential and integral component of their business marketing plans” (para. 1). With the introduction of social media outlets, advertisers and marketers are handed a new tool to take a step towards more innovative, more effective marketing. Applications (apps) such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok allow new forms of advertisements that can reach target demographic individuals directly where they are, without having to show or hand them something tangible.

There are two general types of social media apps. According to Curtis Foreman (2017), there are two categories: social networks and media-sharing networks. He goes further to explain

that social networking applications, such as “Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, are applications used in order to connect with people (and brands) online” (para. 8). These applications allow users to connect or friend other users and companies so that users can stay up to date on each other's lives or company products, etc. The second type, media sharing networks, are very similar but have different overarching purposes. Applications such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok are considered media-sharing networks because account holders use these applications “to find and share photos, video, live video, and other media online” (Foreman, 2017, para. 14). These applications exist merely to attempt to connect people and ideology through commonality on the apps.

The idea of engaging in commonality is unique and interesting when it comes to using social media for advertising and marketing purposes. This is one factor that helps make social media such a valuable tool for advertising. To engage well with the users of these different applications, the applications themselves typically group the users of the app into categories based on things that they are perceived to like. This puts people into specific groups based on their common “likes.” This is used to push certain content into the users’ feed, specifically content that the application designers think the viewer will enjoy. This is interesting because these applications can collect specific data to inquire exact information about a certain person’s demographic. They can find age, gender, interests, and location; then, they choose to cater to certain sponsored advertisements. This creates a whole new game for marketers and advertisers. With this application, specific advertisements can be created and delivered straight into the hands of the exact type of people who want to use or buy their product. This is extremely important for new companies, especially those still trying to get their name out there, because it guarantees that people who should be interested will be the ones to whom the advertisement is sent the most.

This gives the advertisers an advantage because they can present their advertisements to precisely the kind of people who would buy their products. But this also comes with more specified knowledge regarding the advertisement's success. Timm (2010) explains in *Branding by the Masses*:

For a long time, companies have been able to broadcast their messages out and assume that they had been received. Now social media are turning that on its head. Not only are people able to talk back to companies, which is scary enough on its own, but they're also able to talk to each other much more freely than they were before, which has really changed the communications landscape. It requires a shift in mindset. (para. 4)

Social media has completely changed the way that consumers and companies can communicate with one another. The most significant perk that social media gives is that “social media enables companies to connect with their customers, improve awareness of their brands, influence consumer’s attitudes, receive feedback, help to improve current products and services and increase sales” (Dwivedi, 2021, para. 2). Social media has allowed for advertisers to communicate directly to their specified audiences, but it also allows for the communication of the customer to the company. Customers can present likes and comments on social media directly on the post or company page, which is displayed to the whole world. This is good when the comments are good, but it can be damaging to companies when customer reactions and evaluations are adverse. Overall, social media allows companies to see and know how well advertisement campaigns ran, which benefits the companies.

As consumers can use the limitless options for social media, advertisers also can use different types of advertisements on different social applications. Each application offers various

opportunities for marketers and advertisers to share their content. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat all provide different ways of sharing advertisements.

Instagram offers advertisement options, including stories, posts, videos, carousel, collections, explore, IGTV, and Instagram shopping. Facebook offers image, video, video poll, carousel, slideshow, collection, instant experience, lead, dynamic, messengers, stories, stories augmented reality, and playable advertisements. TikTok allows advertisers to create infeed, brand take over, top view, branded hashtag challenges, and branded effects. Snapchat offers sponsored geo-filters, lenses, and snap ads. Each of these ways of advertising is beneficial to advertisers and marketers. They can choose to use specific applications based on the generation or type of people that they hope to reach. Another option for these companies is to make accounts on these different social media types and build their “presence” on these applications. This works differently for different companies but also allows for more opportunities for companies trying to advertise than simply using traditional marketing tactics.

Influencer Marketing

Another form of social media advertising that is becoming more popular is Influencer Marketing. As consumers are becoming more comfortable with having an online presence and more affluent with the tools of social media, ordinary people are becoming social media famous. These people who have become comfortable and popular are now paving the way for Influencer Marketing. Jarrar et al. (2020) claim:

Today, social media influencer marketing has become a major marketing tool for brands all over the world. This was enabled by the popularity and wide acceptance of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, which enabled ordinary, everyday people to become social media influencers. (para. 2)

An influencer is an individual on a social media platform who has a certain level of following, who influences their audience in some way. Jarrar et al. (2020) state, “influencers are those individuals who have built a large social media following and who are perceived as trusted and influential in one or several niche markets” (para. 1). This is a new version of “celebrity endorsements.” Except, current-day influencers do not need to be your typical versions of popularized celebrities. These influencers did not gain popularity by being rich, famous, athletes, or artists. Guoquan (2021) explains:

These influencers are referred to as every day, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts. (para. 2)

Using influencer marketing allows companies to gain a following by using a trusted influencer to deliver a positive message about a company. This automatically gives the advertising company credibility because the influencer's followers trust the influencer’s judgment.

The thing that is so valuable about using influencers for marketing is that influencers change the game regarding loyalty for a brand. Consumers tend to trust modern influencers because they are experienced in the fields/products they advertise. Rather than using a random athlete to promote vacuum cleaners, influencers who are mothers will advertise for companies that sell baby products, or they will share their amazon lists of products they use. Guoquan (2021) explains that “when an influencer recommends a product, it seems more trustworthy than traditional advertising and, thus, consumers are more likely to purchase the recommended product” (para. 3). This significantly affects customer perception of a product or company

because they see real people use the products, rather than people who put their name to random products simply because they are famous. Using influencer marketing tactics significantly increases customer loyalty if done appropriately because it is a personal way for companies to connect with their consumers. With Influencer marketing and prominent reviews from real people, customers tend to believe their word over that of a far-off company's marketing team.

Social Media Marketing and Customer Loyalty

Personal, authentic communication is essential to marketing to target Millennial and Gen Z clients. Customers have gone so far as to seemingly require honest communication and a relationship with a company as a bare minimum. Having the ability to communicate with a company at face value through social media has become normal for consumers, but intentionality from companies is now becoming a required feature of marketing. But with all the communication ability to and from companies, sometimes clients get lost in all the conversations. Dwivedi (2021) found in a study of "277 millennials that peer recommendations significantly affect customer trust and brand loyalty intention" (para. 12). To gain positive brand loyalty, talk outside of the company must be positive and a good representation of the company.

Companies seem to have the chance to build this conversation. Companies must effectively communicate with their consumers through social media to build a good reputation and conversation platform for their business. In the book *Loyalty 3.0*, Paharia (2013) explains that customers want a relationship with the brand. Social media is an excellent tool to facilitate this. It is important for companies to initiate this positive conversation and to create relationship-based community and conversations with individuals who are seeking their brand and products. This is the way that companies must now operate to engage and keep loyal customers.

Social Media in Small Business Marketing/Virality

Something that social media practitioners have been able to observe is the benefits of using social media for small business marketing. This is something that has never been documented before. During the COVID-19 pandemic, small businesses seemed to surge. One thing that made this possible was using social media to market their brands and the chance to go viral. With Instagram Reels and introducing TikTok for personal marketing, businesses seemed to go viral more than ever before. The virality opportunity opens many doors for small businesses and individuals to become “famous,” which is how so many companies have been found and individuals have been turned into influencers. This advantage of social media has benefited these businesses as they have launched and become recognized widely. This is something that would not be possible without the usage of social media.

Through creating a personal photography business, researcher Carley Kolter has experienced the virality that is obtainable through using Reels as a promotional tactic. After launching her business and promoting it on Instagram and through Facebook groups, Kolter increased the account following by 100% in a month, grew engagement by 3000%, and gained over 28,000 views on Reels. The most interesting concept behind the virality of these Reels is that Kolter’s account has a mere 164 followers, yet has reached over 6,000 views on one video, which is significantly more than she has following her business account directly.

The advantage of using these kinds of social media tools is that it increases your exposure to individuals who may not even be following your account. This can positively impact businesses by increasing following, engagements, and eventual sales with the business.

Social Media Negatives for Consumers

While social media has improved the marketing effectiveness for companies, it is also filled with features that negatively affect consumers. To have an accurate view of social media, one must also consider the negative aspects and the consequences that occur because of malpractice.

Social Media in Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is a complex phrase that names the concept of humans interacting with one another. The ability to have interpersonal communication is a gift that only humans have. Humans were made to communicate together, and they can do this in various spoken languages. Gulla (2019) explains:

Basic components of interpersonal communication include how humans adjust and adapt their verbal communication and non-verbal communication during face-to-face interaction, how messages are produced, how uncertainty influences behavior and information-management strategies, deception in interpersonal exchange, social contentions, and social interactions mediated by technology. (para. 1)

This form of communication relies on the notion of two people communicating in person through face-to-face connection and interaction. Relationships form through the process of interpersonal communication. Gulla (2019) explains the process of interpersonal communication as defined by the individual and the other:

There is a general tendency among people to know how 'the other' will act, interact and react in the context of interpersonal communication as they are averse to uncertainty. Predictability of behavior of 'the other' creates a comfort zone for the people in the context of interpersonal communication. (para. 2)

So, by having this intimate type of conversation and communication with one another, humans can break the uncertainty barrier, allowing conversations to be deeper, without fear of uncertainty, because they can know and understand, and even predict, how the other will act and respond to various things. Gulla continues to explain that to truly have interpersonal communication, the group of people must open up and step outside of their comfort zones to develop the level of trust needed to have this kind of connection with one another. So, as each person reveals things about themselves, the other will feel safe and trust will be formed, which opens doors for them to participate in the communication. There seems to be a reward on both sides of the conversation, so the communication continues, and the relationship improves. Gulla then points out:

Unfortunately, the rise of social media has changed the rules of the game significantly. Interpersonal communication pattern has undergone sea change during the last twenty years thanks to the growing dominance of social media platforms which have empowered the people to connect with the world in real-time without stepping out of their comfort zones. (para. 6)

Social media allows individuals to present any version of themselves to the world, giving individuals the power to disclose only information they are comfortable with. This sounds like a good thing as if it protects people from the intrusion of privacy, but it hinders individuals' ability to advance in communication with others. People do not have to step out of their comfort zones to engage in social media, which seems good at face value, but it causes them to count a loss when it comes to interpersonal communication at work, in community, or between a friend circle (Gulla, 2019). To add to this lack of interpersonal communication skills, Beniwal (2018) believes that:

As people today spend most of their attention in the virtual life, they often tend to invest less energy in their immediate present resulting in the weakening of social ties, loss of the ability to interact and engage oneself in face-to-face interaction, and social alienation, which is among the most destructive negative impacts of social media on interpersonal relations. (para. 8)

Social media allows people to spend most of their time communicating with people in a virtual world where appropriate non-verbal skills are not necessary. This seems to not have a big effect on humans when focusing on virtual communication; however, when these nonverbal interpersonal communication skills are not used, people tend to lose the ability to use them. They are like a muscle that needs to be worked out. This results in a society that struggles or is nervous to connect in person. Gulla (2019) says:

Hence, it is imperative that we look at the social media space with a bit of caution. While social media has opened up a new avenue for conversations amongst the people of all hues through ever-expanding online communities, it has seriously impaired the age-old tradition of interpersonal communication, which is so crucial in family, society as well as workplaces. (para. 10)

If interpersonal communication is not viewed as necessary, social media and virtual communication will continue to be chosen as preferences, and our world will end up as an interpersonal-communication-lacking society where face-to-face communication is uncommon, which would be detrimental to individuals in our society.

Without the practice of interpersonal communication, the message is often disrupted through communication. Schneiderman (2013) presented that “58% of communication is through body language, 35 percent through vocal tone, pitch, and emphasis, and a mere 7 percent through

the content of the message” (para. 2). This means that the majority of healthy communication is through non-verbal cues. When talking through social media, 93% of the conversation is missed. This results in negative consequences and a less full relationship than one that would result from an in-person conversation. Social media is destructive to interpersonal communication because it removes the requirement for trust, honesty, and non-verbal skills. It gives humans a version that is missing 93% of what makes communication meaningful.

Social Media Psychology and Impacts on Mental Health

Social media platforms are intentionally built to keep users on the applications. There are many psychological theories and principles that are built into app algorithms that learn individual users’ practices and configure that data to change to keep users’ attention and increase their usage of said app. Social media is addictive and created that way to keep your attention. The way that social media is built wires users to continue scrolling. It feeds users information and notifications to peak interest and keep it for long periods. The documentary, *The Social Dilemma* details that Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are used to feed and keep users on the app and to stimulate them in the right way to keep them busy on the platform. It is intentionally manipulating users into continued usage of their service.

By participating in social media platforms, humans confuse online communication, scrolling, and viewing others’ posts with genuine relationships and healthy communication. The time spent viewing others' posts and profiles do not equate to anything besides learning information about another person. The interesting thing is that by using social media to regulate information about perceived relationships, users can learn a lot about someone without knowing them personally. This can lead to other issues further down the line, such as social anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Twenge, 2019).

In an attempt to connect the world, social media outlets were invented. Our society has always been interested in making communication more accessible and simplified. From the Pony Express that delivered letters to the telegraph that gave the first “instant” messages, then to email, and now to cell phones, our society has been thriving on invention after invention to make communication more efficient.

Now, at what seems to be the peak of communication, cell phones have apps to make communication even “easier” than before. With the increased use of short message services (SMS) and social media apps that make communicating more accessible, there also seems to be an increase in the number of people who struggle to communicate with others: “studies find that those who spend more time on digital media, especially social media, are more likely to experience loneliness, suggesting that electronic communication provides leaner, less fulfilling forms of interaction and less robust social support” (Twenge, 2019, para. 8). This study suggests that the very communication apps and outlets that are supposed to help with communication, seem to be harming one’s ability to have adequate social skills. The people using these communication apps the most are the ones suffering from feeling the most lonely and isolated from others. Twenge continues to say that “human beings have an inherent need to belong, predisposing them to desire social interaction with others” (para. 1). These people that are seeking relationships from others online desire the relational qualities of humans but are not receiving it from the social media profiles that they are trying to connect to: “the shift toward digital media has led some to theorize that digital communication has displaced face-to-face interaction among adolescents” (Twenge, para. 2). Society is choosing to try to interact with others online, rather than in person, and the effect of it seems to be correlated with mental health

issues. The more someone uses and abuses social media, the more isolated and lonelier that person feels.

Instagram is a platform for communication through digital images and videos; however, it fails to communicate a true reality. Instagram is a social media application where users create a profile to post pictures and captions and interact with other users. Instagram, if used appropriately, is like an online scrapbook; however, it is commonly misused. Instagram is easily swayed into an app of judgment and comparison between users. Stapelton (2017) explains this by saying, “social networking sites (SNSs) provide emerging adults with extreme and unprecedented transparency, exposing them to a plethora of opportunities for social comparison” (para. 1). Instagram allows its users to *create* a profile, based on whatever qualities they choose to express. Rarely do people choose to express their average or bad days on social media. Rather, people choose to sport the exciting, happy days and experiences on their accounts. Society *poses* on social media and “flexes” the good days. Society communicates a perfect alternate reality that its followers get sucked into believing. People post perfectly edited, aesthetically pleasing pictures on Instagram. Initially, viewers compare themselves to the image posts, but later unconsciously compare themselves to the “likes” by others on people’s posts: “social media websites offer Likes, a numeric representation of social acceptance, as a form of ‘online social currency,’ which can be seen as a secondary reinforcer that drives people's tendency to compare with others” (Rosenthal-von der Pütten, et al., 2019, para. 1). Since our society is so busy with comparison, it fails to realize that everyone is choosing what they want to communicate. Instagram allows users to deliberately decide to post exactly what they want. This allows people to post things that can unintentionally offend someone or make someone insecure. Accepting

these false realities that people post hurt our society's ability to communicate honestly. Instead of talking to people, our society is becoming jealous of each other based on false representations.

Impact on Child Development

As social media and media devices are becoming more obtainable and common in culture, individuals are using technology younger and more frequently than generations before. While television watching may be limited, children can supplement television screen time with cell phones, and tablets. (Robidoux, 2019). Children are being placed in front of screens for entertainment and to give parents breaks, but this is causing more harm than good, specifically for the child. Robidoux explains that "there is a relationship between increased screen time and greater risk of physical health complications, mental health concerns, and negative outcomes on cognitive, language, social, and emotional development" (para. 1). It is widespread nowadays to have media platforms and accessible technology at an extremely young age: "in 2011, a nationally representative survey found 52% of children age ≤ 8 had access to a mobile device; by 2013, this access had increased to 75%" (para. 1). This statistic is ever-increasing in today's culture. Not only do children eight years and younger have access to a mobile device, but they are also using them significantly throughout the day. Robidoux continues to explain that the daily average time spent on media is "2 hours 39 minutes for 2 to 4-year-olds, 2 hours 56 minutes for 5 to 8-year-olds, and 5 hours 55 minutes for 8 to 12-year-olds" (para. 1). The author explains that this time is mostly spent watching television, movies, or videos. This consumption is often spent without parental supervision, starting as young as age eight.

This increasing usage of media has disastrous consequences for children. Robidoux (2019) explains that "earlier age of media use, higher amounts of media use, and poor media quality content are all significant predictors of poor executive functioning (e.g., impulse control, self-

regulation, mental flexibility) and emotional intelligence deficits (i.e., the ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings)” (para. 3), as well as poor self-regulation skills. She continues to share that children are more likely to have increased speech delays when using hand-held technologies more often. She writes, “in addition, each 30-minute increase in handheld screen time was associated with a 49% increased risk of expressive speech delay” (para. 4). This means that children today are at significant risk of having speech delays and other cognitive delays because of their excessive consumption of media. Thirty minutes is all it takes to impact these functions in children, and children today spend four times this amount daily on average.

Along with risks of speech delay and poor self-regulation skills, children who use excess media risk increased chances for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Specifically, Robidoux (2019) has shared that “increased use of computer and video games has been associated with a number of mental health conditions, including increased diagnoses of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) later in adolescence” (para. 6). The media platforms are directly impacting the mental health of users. And once children with ADHD start playing these games or using these media devices, they have a more challenging time setting boundaries and pulling themselves off the games without parental enforcement, furthering the technology addiction problem (para. 6).

Media usage also correlates with physical health problems in children. Spending so much time on hand-held devices increases the amount of time that children remain sedentary. As a child, it used to be expected to meet your friends outside to play games. Children would run around, learn to communicate, and share and play with others, which teaches many life skills while encouraging children to be active. With the increase of media, children are remaining inside, sitting down, and not having real communication. Using media regularly correlates with

physical health issues in children. Robidoux (2019) explains that “for children ages 4 to 9, viewing time of more than 1.5 hours per day was a risk factor for obesity due to increased sedentary activity, unhealthy eating in programming and advertisements, increased snacking while viewing, and interference with normal sleep patterns” (para. 7). Since the daily average of screen time is double this at minimum, it puts children at a high-risk factor for obesity and sleep abnormalities. Having media in bedrooms tends to interfere with sleep patterns, especially among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Increased media usage also affects how children view themselves, significantly influencing their body image. Robidoux (2019) quotes that “one-half of girls and one-third of boys ages 6 to 8 report their ideal bodies are thinner than their current body, and one-third of children ages 5 to 6 choose an ideal body size that is thinner than their current perceived size; children are also aware of dieting by age 6” (para. 7). The comparison and insecurity that is seen in young children is upsetting and one result of excess media use. Social channels influence people of all ages, but in the foundational years of children’s development, this problem will only lead to worse consequences when they become adults.

Social Media and Privacy Concerns

Social media has grown considerably from its creation until the present day. Social media is ever-changing and continually growing. As it grew, Bright (2021) says that “consumers were constantly challenged with new platforms to learn, changes to graphic user interfaces, and ever more complex consent agreements” (para. 5). The growth of social media has allowed users to create personal platforms, that have required and expected more and more information with every update. As social media sites have become more personal, social media sites have been

able to gather and collect more information than ever before. Social media sites have privacy policies that grow in length and detail with every update. Bright (2021) says that “these morphing privacy policies enabled social media companies to collect massive amounts of consumer data while providing little consumer protection. Consumers were, in effect, trading access to their data for free access to the platforms” (para. 5). Social media sites, instead of listing privacy policies regarding how they were going to protect their users, detailed the ways that they were going to invade users’ privacy once the user accepted the policy. These policies are typically long and hard to understand, so users often accept these policies blindly to use the app that everyone else is using. Bright goes so far as to comment that these privacy policies have started a privacy concern crisis. Bright believes that since social media has such a big audience that they collect information from, that platform heads must reevaluate the data they collect and how they will protect their users to gain their trust again.

Information Collection

Before discussing how companies can, or should, resolve privacy concerns, it is best to understand what they are doing to cause the issues. It is known that companies collect information on users of social media sites, specifically to use for marketing purposes. Collecting user information is beneficial for finding specific target audiences and creating marketing plans. Dogruel (2019) goes so far as to say that “targeting Internet users based on their personal profiles and behavioral data has become a common practice online” (para. 1). This information is collected when users use the applications or scroll through the internet. This is now taking place through a new practice of data collection.

Big Data is a recently understood concept of information collection. Big Data has a three-part definition. It is a large amount of data, collected passively from digital interactions, with

great variety, at a high velocity. Before there was Big Data, there was Traditional Data. This is the title for ‘asking for your name/phone number/email/address/simple interests.’ This is very common for businesses to ask consumers and information that consumers willingly hand over, sometimes to get a deal. The difference between this kind of data and Big Data is that Big Data happens without consumers knowing about it. Consumers willingly tell store representatives/cashiers their phone number or email to get receipts or coupons. However, most average people do not notice the data collection of their IP Addresses, Clickstreams, and GPS Locations. Big Data is defined by the 3 V’s, according to Paharia. These V’s are Volume, Variety, and Velocity. A large volume of data is being collected and saved in kilobytes and terabytes. The information is collected in real time and is a wide variety of structured and unstructured data.

Structured and unstructured data are something that also makes Big Data different. Structured data is data that makes sense. It is collected and can be used and organized efficiently. It is the kind of data that can be put into rows and columns and accounts for roughly 20% of data collected today. On the other hand, unstructured data is data that is not easily organized, cannot be contained into rows and columns, and is roughly 80% of the data collected. It is, for example, images, audio, video, files, emails, and spreadsheets. In an article by Niebel (2019), he said that this “data which has become available to firms is often not collected intentionally, but in a heterogeneous and unstructured way. The ability to analyze such data, extract insights and appropriate value from it represents a key challenge to firms” (para. 1). This large amount of unstructured data is sometimes so much that it is hard to analyze and control. These sorts of data require a large sum of storage to keep.

A significant difference about Big Data is that it is not streamlined to one source. Paharia (2013) mentions that it is unlikely to be in one place or owned by one person. And it is growing, seemingly doubling in data every 1.2 years. This data is extremely useful for companies. It allows companies to answer the questions of what you do, where you do it, when you do it, and what you like (Paharia). It benefits companies because it gives better customer insight, improves operations, gives more insightful market intelligence, gives agile supply chain management, brings data-driven innovation, and shows smarter recommendations and targeting. So Big Data collects a lot of information all the time, giving a lot of information to various companies, and it is very successful at its job. The Big Data industry is predicted to reach a value of \$103 billion by 2027: 97% of companies now say they plan to start investing in AI and Big Data. Therefore, businesses seem to think this is the real deal, and it is when it comes to successfully knowing data about customers.

Big Data collection is an interesting concept because it is good for business by making targeting your audience more direct. By collecting this information, companies and social media sites know how to target their audiences directly, but social media sites also learn how to keep their users on their apps. The algorithms of social networking sites collect information that allows for online behavioral advertising. Dogruel (2019) explains that these are algorithmically adjusted advertisements that use previous web surfing behaviors to predict how customers will act and respond to advertisements; thus, they can learn and attract that customer better. This means that the technology itself can learn about the user, track the user's individual habits on the application or web browser, and then use that information to better advertise directly to a particular user. While this is beneficial for brands and social media sites because their product is getting more advertisement and usage, collecting this information without explicit consent takes

advantage of the large amounts of online data (Dogruel, 2019). It is walking the border between being ethical and being invasive. Eslami et al. (2019) believe:

This opacity of advertising algorithms and potential infringements on users' privacy has resulted in calls for more transparency in such aspects as the disclosure of how advertisers collect and process personal and behavioral data and how advertisements are tailored to users. (para. 1)

It also causes a more significant ethical issue when considering other potential factors that encourage businesses and social networking sites to collect this information. While social networking sites allow "advertisers to tailor their ads more effectively and target to social media users more precisely, especially those who express brand preferences and interests on SNS" (Hongwei, 2013, para. 1). He continues to explain that it also allows SNS to "generate revenues by supplying mountains of their subscribers' personal information to marketers, recruiters and any interested party" (para. 1). So, essentially, the way that social media networking sites can stay free applications, is because they are collecting so much information that they can sell it off to create revenue for their companies. Businesses are collecting and selling users' data for their company gain while covering up and complicating giving reports detailing this collection to the individual consumer. It seems like it would cause distress to users of the applications since it is invading and exposing personal information, seemingly behind one's back.

However, as researchers study social media and privacy concerns, there seems to be a disconnect between the facts. Bright (2021) explains that as social media usage grows, it is joined by a general privacy concern among users. This makes sense because a large amount of information is being collected and transferred among the different social media platforms. One may think that this would cause users to stop using social media sites. However, even though

users are aware of the privacy implications and the data collected, they continue to use these platforms instead of getting rid of them. Researchers like Chen (2018) like to name this the “*privacy paradox* on social media, the disconnection between privacy concern and privacy protection” (para. 8). It is an interesting concept because users quite literally know how they are being taken advantage of. However, they will still sacrifice this information and personal privacy to use a free application. This seems to allow social media sites to continue their semi-unethical practices.

Ethics of Social Media and Business

After examining four social media cases, Bowen (2013) determined that there are 15 ethical guidelines that they could find through their observed social media cases. It is interesting how after looking at four different cases, he can view the topics through the lens of ethics in social media. As he studies the other cases, many defined ethical issues are involved, even in just these four studied cases.

One ethical issue that is very interesting to study and prevalent in today’s world is the idea that social media can be used to learn about individual users of social media technology and track and trace any of this learned data from social media sites. In strategic communication classes, students learn about all the information tracked and stored by social media apps. These social media apps can track any details regarding a person’s individual life, ranging from their demographic features (i.e., race, age, ethnicity, gender, location, wealth, status, etc.) to their interests (i.e., sports, fashion, music, pets, events, etc.). Golder et al.’s (2017) article explains that many controversies revolve around social media being a good place for researchers to accumulate data. This is one of the most controversial lines when discussing and researching the

ethics involved in social media usage. There are differing opinions regarding the guidelines that should or should not be used on the ethical conduct of social media.

While information tracking is beneficial for marketers, giving them advantages in the marketing world by giving them specific detailed information regarding their, where does the line fall for ethical boundaries regarding the consumer? Consumers have privacy rights, which they often waive in the Terms and Conditions without reading. Regardless of the legality of information tracking, ethicalness should be factored into the equation.

To keep ethics at the front of a business, managers and leaders of said business organization should strive to maintain communication and relationships as an important, if not the most important, factor when relating to consumers. Venzin (2021) recommends a five-step process for establishing a code of ethics to create open and transparent relationships and communication styles with consumers. To show this communication style, managers should develop a code of ethics, run a content audit, get to know influencers, engage in environmental scanning, and be transparent. This will help organizations keep ethics at the forefront of the company. It is essential to have this ethical plan established so that businesses will have guidelines to keep their company in check, especially in a moral sense. If companies do not develop these things previously listed, the company will not have a sense of direction when dealing with ethical issues and a potential ethical crisis.

In Ward's (2011) book, *Ethics in the Media*, the author explains that ethics is a huge need in the media. Ethics should drive how we are involved in social media and how to address issues in social media. Ethics guidelines on how businesses should practice social media and how to best use it in the healthiest, most productive light for the consumer and the company.

Christian Worldview

As a Christian and social media practitioner, one is sometimes challenged to determine and decipher the ethical lines and boundaries involved in using social media. Social media is a great tool that can be used to connect people all over the world from many different backgrounds and experiences. But, like all things infiltrated by humans, social media can be a weapon for mass destruction. Social media can be an excellent tool for consumers to connect with others and with businesses, and great for marketers to deliver content directly to specific customers.

However, when social media is used to manipulate, bully, and stalk users of the apps, it can be destructive, especially from an ethical standpoint. Social media platforms are designed to attract consumers to the app and, if used enough, can produce addiction-like symptoms to it. It keeps people's attention and causes them to desire screen time on the app. This is a topic long discussed in the social media field, considering how practitioners can best use social media to boost their sales and be productive in a marketing sense, but not overstep and unethically use social media for their gain, regardless of the damage that is caused to the users.

After researching the Bible, the topic of free will made the most sense with social media ethics. God gives humans free will to make their own decisions. In this decision-making process, humans can choose to make good or destructive choices that can damage themselves. But God still gives humans free will. In the sense of social media, businesses can use their platforms to promote their companies. This is an advantage for the business. Whether or not the app is ethical, or the business is using ethical practices; it can use social media. It is ultimately the consumer's choice to be on social media apps. The consumer chooses which apps to download. It is still the consumers' choice to use this product and to continue using the applications even with knowledge of the potential addiction.

It is a hard line to walk because, as practitioners, it is often believed that it is their responsibility to protect consumers. Still, consumers have choices to make of their own that practitioners cannot control. Businesses need to ensure that their social media usage is ethical and not misleading to the people they represent. Companies need to ensure they are not crossing established ethical boundaries already set in place for them. Social media and its ethics ultimately revolve around the balance that social media needs to be ethical for both the brand or organization being represented and the individuals using media platforms who make their own decisions regarding their use of social media.

Responsibility Discussion

When trying to conclude the best way to keep social media ethical, improve the good things about social media, and mitigate the negative aspects, it is crucial to understand who is responsible for what.

Companies are responsible for the applications they produce, the information they collect, and what they do with it. When companies design their applications, they should be responsible for all factors of their creation. They should be accountable for protecting their users by protecting the information given to them. They should ensure that information cannot be stolen between accounts. However, since platforms often sell this information, the individual platforms should be required to give information to users that is easy to understand and clear to the point regarding what will be done with their data. Bright (2021) explains that in attempting to be responsible:

Companies in both Europe and the United States are expanding their executive suites to include Data Protection Officers in an effort to address growing concerns over data privacy and new regulations like the GDPR and CCPA. In addition, executives like Tim Cook of

Apple, Inc. have called for “privacy nutrition labels” to be used by any company that is collecting consumer data online. (para. 38)

The privacy nutrition labels would provide the most relevant privacy information without a lengthy “Terms and Conditions” agreement (Bright). Having privacy regulations and nutrition labels helps protect user information by giving bounds to the information collection and providing clear information to allow consumers to make informed decisions regarding their information privacy. It would also be beneficial to consumers for companies to continue the practice of allowing consumers to customize their tracking preferences, as well as allowing users to request more information regarding advertisements they receive (Dogruel, 2019).

However, consumers also have to be responsible for their actions. It is the consumer’s choice to purchase technology, download social applications, and monitor their screen time. Consumers need to be informed of their decisions, but they also bear the responsibility for the consequences caused by their choices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media ethics are a complex issue that does not have one specific fix-all scenario. Social media can be a valuable tool because it can connect many completely different people quickly, even if they are miles away. It is the easiest way for people to meet people from different cultures, environments, and areas of the world. It makes communication much easier than it was before social media was created. It makes dialogue open and available. Social media can be an excellent tool for marketers to gain knowledge and information about their target audiences to increase their promotional success. However, with the great possibilities that social media brings, it also carries many ethical issues. Social media can have problems due to the amount of information it collects, the lack of privacy it gives consumers, and

consequences for the consumer, including social media addiction, mental and physical health issues, and privacy invasion. Ultimately, it is up to the company to practice ethically and the users to use social media ethically and make healthy choices regarding their personal social media practices.

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