Social Media's Impact on Community: The Modern Day Obsession with Personality Tests, Credulousness, and Validity

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An analysis of the socio-cultural changes in society due to the increasing reliance on the internet through a sociological and neuroscientific lens

Abstract

The pervasive influence of social media has brought about an onslaught of perceived sociocultural norms, and by proxy, it has blurred the lines of decorum, identity, and information. The mirage of illusory perceptions has at its source human beings' need for constant validity. This paper delves into the multifaceted impacts of society's reliance on social media and online interaction on the real world and people's selves by examining the lack of identity, media literacy, and the steep decline in friendship in recent generations following millennials. One area of exploration is the influence of social media on identity formation. This paper analyzes how the prevalence of personality tests shapes self-perception, and how the phenomena of Buzzfeed personality tests fade into the enigma of mental health questionnaires and the emerging culture of shallow self-diagnoses. Examining these phenomena aims to elucidate the metaverse's impact on an individual's self-perception.

The paper further investigates society's overwhelming reliance on the digital realm, its inability to bounce back from said reliance, and its associated desensitizations since COVID-19.

The toxic culture of online solace is promoted by the media companies that host them. The main goal of social media platforms is to keep users on their apps for as long as possible to collect more data and to show more advertisements. Social media companies take advantage of triggering people's emotions to do so.

Given that anger is the strongest emotion, social media algorithms try to provoke users by using content with high shock value. High shock value content is often intense and misleading, leading to identity politics and disturbing phenomena such as conspiracy theories and in extreme cases, abetting genocide. This paper seeks to unravel the implications of these phenomena on both online interactions and broader societal dynamics.

I n conclusion, this paper aims to investigate social media's manipulation of its users' neurochemical and psychological processes as a means of preserving user engagement on their platforms. It also examines the anthropological impact of social media in a modern post-covid era through an evaluation of the current status quo in corporate methodology, primal human behaviors, and the intersection of fast-paced metaverse and entertainment.

Introduction

Be it the boom of technology from the industrial age, or the recent emergence of the internet as we know it, pre-existing corporate greed has been the flipside of development. It has infiltrated the newly emerging metaverse and has let loose its pernicious self on millions of people worldwide to birth a society that is fast-paced, disconnected, individualistic, and materialistic.

Since the 1990s there has been an exponential uptick in people's reliance on technology. The emergence of social media platforms has led to shaping perceptions, behaviors, and even identities. The impact that social media has had on human life is profound, destroying concepts such as the "third place" altogether. The rapid change of socio-cultural dynamics has brought to an intersection an obsession with personality tests, a proliferation of sensationalism and a quest for validation.

The disconnect from reality through the use of social media is found not only in Gen Z but in almost all generations from Boomers to Gen Alpha. This has been detrimental to our current society in that it perpetuates

a fast-paced individualistic society, something that is reflective of the capitalistic and power-hungry values of those controlling the scene.

As teenagers growing up with social media in the palms of their hands, Gen Z faces an identity crisis rooted in consumerism. Microtrends have bred off the fast-paced world Gen Z has grown up in, attaching personalities and faces to materialistic and half-baked worlds through the lens of their phones. Gone are the days of living in the real world, as the metaverse has taken over.

As the generation with the highest focus on mental health, science, and change, Gen Zers have found themselves in a paradox that is further exacerbated by the rising rates of depression prevalent in this day and age. The time spent on social media directly takes away from the time spent in reality leading to distorted perceptions as individuals see life through social media rather than living it through the reality that they are part of.

Identity

Coquette, Clean Girl, Cottage-Core, E-girl, Hot Cheeto Girl, Pink Princess Pilate Girl, and Witch-core, are just a few of the micro-aesthetics presented across a variety of social media platforms, most notably TikTok and Instagram. Other sub-cultures include astrology, with people describing different facts and attitudes or behaviors assigned to various zodiac signs; Meyers-Briggs-Personality-Type (MBTI) which takes up the top ten spots of most popular subreddits under the psychology genre; companies such as BuzzFeed being most notable for their various personality tests such as "Answer these few questions about your dream wedding and we'll tell you which Disney princess you are" or "Which fruit are you?" quizzes. Aesthetics, astrology, MBTI, and Buzzfeed all have one thing in common– quick and easy answers to what many individuals struggle to identify for themselves: Their Identity.

Microtrends/Aesthetics

Certain aesthetics come with a lifestyle attached to them, creating an allure for a perfect life when obtaining products– fueling the desire for materialism– and by proxy filling the need for validity; fostering a false sense of community and belonging through the aforementioned mediums. In essence, these microtrends offer a form of social validation, filling a void in individuals' lives that exists due to a lack of genuine connection and

belonging. People seek to validate their identity and find acceptance within these online communities by aligning themselves with a specific aesthetic or lifestyle. However, this sense of validation is often superficial, fostering a false sense of belonging based on external validation rather than genuine connection.

Validity

To be healthy, a person must have three interconnected needs in check: Physical, Emotional, and Social. Physical health includes hygienic, nutritional, and cardiovascular health; emotional health is about cognitive, intellectual, and behavioral health; and social health is the ability to connect with other people and maintain healthy relationships. Oftentimes, these relationships are fostered and harbored through various community interactions from infancy to grave. Examples include neighborhood gatherings, religious attendances, recreational/athletic facilities, and more.

The deep-rooted anthropological need for social connections dates back to prehistoric times. Humans, being social animals, would need to form what's now known as bands; small populations of people who would travel together in search of food and other natural resources. Being a part of a band was essential to survival, as being left behind was almost always a death sentence.

Throughout the emergence of various populations from tribes to clans, villages to kingdoms, and dynasties to republics, humans have consistently banded together to lead each other in pursuit of survival, albeit against tyranny nowadays. Cultures were created in these tight-knit societies, and the need to follow cultural norms and concepts of right and wrong was instilled as humans faded away from primal life to civilization, though sharing many similar concepts at the roots of society.

Social norms were created through the processes of civilization. With humans now relying more on a social aspect than a survival aspect, governance, and rule setting through subconscious sociocultural means began to emerge. Social norms are a form of internalization, dispositions formed by long-lasting relationships (e.g.

parents).[1] An individual's desire to rebel against certain norms could be seen as a logical outcome of his having seen a bad relationship in the past.

Following social norms is said to aid in maintaining relationships, helping an individual's social health to thrive. The desire to belong is strongly rooted in the will to survive.

Maintaining good social health promotes a sense of belonging. The need for a sense of belonging dates back to primitive human behaviors, primarily being a need for being socially accepted. To satisfy this need of theirs, individuals seek validation. Without social acceptance, a person's health is likely to decline as their social needs aren't being met. Numerous studies have cited social isolation to be as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[2]

Seeking validity from others is deep-rooted and has its earliest appearance in young children. As young children transition from infancy into toddlerhood, they begin to become more socially aware. The intrinsic desire for acceptance is why children are excited to show their parents whatever they've worked on or can do; and constantly demand the parents' attention. They're looking for approval with respect to certain actions. Parents, on their part, may use positive attention to instill trust and security in their children. By frequently using positive attention, parents can debilitate negative behavior in children as the kids learn that they wouldn't be receiving any validation for negative behavior. Children persist in fulfilling their desire to receive parental attention. Parents may demonstrate positive attention by smiling back when a baby smiles at them, or by using vocal cues such as a "good job" or "wow", thus demonstrating interest in the child's interest. Feeling validated from a younger age allows children to become confident decision-makers as they grow older.

In the absence of approval, children begin to exhibit behaviors that are approval-seeking, making them more

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[1] Bicchieri, Cristina, Ryan Muldoon, and Alessandro Sontuoso, "Social Norms", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/social-norms/>.

[2] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8095671/#:~:text=Studies%20have%20identified%20numerous%20positive,et%20al.%2C%201992).

vulnerable to external factors such as manipulation, and to internal disturbances such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and more. [3]

Such behaviors have been exacerbated in recent years due to the emergence of the internet.

Demographic Pleasing

The internet has now become a realm of various social platforms offering a range of content for consumption - from gaming to chat to media sharing - something that has connected people across the world. Over four billion people utilize the internet to this day, many of whom post online in the hope of fame, money, or getting noticed by their favorite celebrities and brands.[4]

Social Media influence has become a fast track to fame. People such as Salem Tovar, Ben Saploss, Nicolas Perry, and Steven Fernandez have all used social media to promote their art, talent, lifestyle, or mindfulness. However, each influencer is known for something completely different than what they first started out with, leading to disadvantages for some, like obesity, ob.. and creating new opportunities for others.

Three out of four of the aforementioned influencers have changed their content entirely based on what content went viral. By getting the consumers' constant attention, they gain a community of followers and hence this becomes a constant source of validation for them. Salem Tovar started with content based on her lifestyle - mainly cosmetic YouTubing. On November 19th, 2020, she blew up, reaching upwards of 3 million views on her latest video. However, the video wasn't a "what's in my bag" or "doing my fiance's makeup" as was her content at the time. It was an analytical video, "How Tiktok Makes You Feel Ugly | a[n] analysis". Her video received incredibly positive traction, gaining comments such as "Unpopular opinion: We need people like you in this community, so truthful and understanding of what Is right or wrong" and others sharing their experiences and insights on the issue. From then on, her account has been focused on analyzing digital socio-cultural trends and issues. Another example is Xiran Jay Zhao, author of the then-unreleased New York Time #1 Bestseller: IRON WIDOW. In 2020 Zhao hadn't posted on YouTube yet, but upon watching Disney's Mulan (2020), she

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[3] Ferguson, S. (2022, October 27). *Why we seek approval and how to stop approval-seeking behavior*. Psych Central. https://psychcentral.com/blog/what-drives-our-need-for-approval#examples-of-approval-seeking-behavior

[4] Rushkoff, D., & Kougan, F. (Directors). (2014). Generation Like [Film]. Frontline.

felt the substantiated urge to create a commentary video on where the movie had failed. As of March 31st, 2024, the video has upwards of 3.5 million views. She received comments such as "This was well worth 30 minutes of my monday after noon." and "I will NEVER stop rewatching Xiran absolutely MERCILESSLY destroying this excuse of a movie." Due to the positive reception and virality of the video itself she continues to make content about Chinese culture and mythology in western media and more.

Steven Fernandez (baby scumbag), a young kid from Compton California started by making videos of him skateboarding and blew up as he started making funny videos. He was able to get money and sponsorships from participating in "frat boy" behavior out in public as a twelve-year-old. Nicolas Perry (Nikocado Avocado) started by creating lifestyle videos regarding veganism and has now transformed into sensationalist video creation of mukbangs. He's incredibly obese and continues to put on more weight to get more views.[5]

There are thousands of content creators who create genuine art and helpful content yet consistently receive minimal viewership because it doesn't have that high shock value the algorithm doesn't push it citing a clear bias for high shock-value content.

In turn, creators receive validation and capitalize off the videos, creating a cycle of becoming increasingly reliant on views. Smart social media creators, in order to grow quicker and larger, will base their content on a niche that is growing and create a community based on a specific type of content that algorithms prefer.

Tovar and Zhao's content offered a feeling of relatability and in turn, a feeling of belonging that translates to "I'm not alone". It allowed people an explanation for their feelings or frustrations with certain issues (I.E. Mulan 2020 and Tiktok's Beauty Standards). This offering of explanation and working through feelings by using evidence and facts is an offer of validation commonly used in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is a highly effective therapy used to help treat a plethora of mental disorders and issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and more. CBT treatment generally involves changing an individual's thinking patterns, using strategies such as learning to recognize distortions in thinking that are creating problems, and then reevaluating them in a new light. [6] Validation is a fundamental aspect of psychotherapy. A study found that in individuals with

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[5] SunnyV2. (2021, November 18). The tragic transformation of nikocado avocado (from 155 to 352 lbs). YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJa2thBJ8Fw

[6] American Psychological Association. (2017). *What is cognitive behavioral therapy?*. Clinical Practice Guide for the Treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/cognitive-behavioral

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), a lack of validation can result in higher heart rates and other negative emotions. The same study also cited that validation is a form of emotional regulation in itself, accomplished by minimizing the frequency, intensity, and duration of an emotional response. [7] Little wonder then, that the videos did well due to the promise of validation.

Proliferation of Attention Seeking Behaviors

Content creators find solace in content creation due to the consistent presence of validation. Danah Boyd. PHD states: Young people want attention. They want validation. And that's not new. It's just that now the possible stage on which you can operate on is much bigger. At the same time, the ability to get attention in a place where there's tons of information, when there are tons of people competing for attention, is also harder.[8] When content with high shock value and validity gets pushed, exaggeration and misinformation spread.
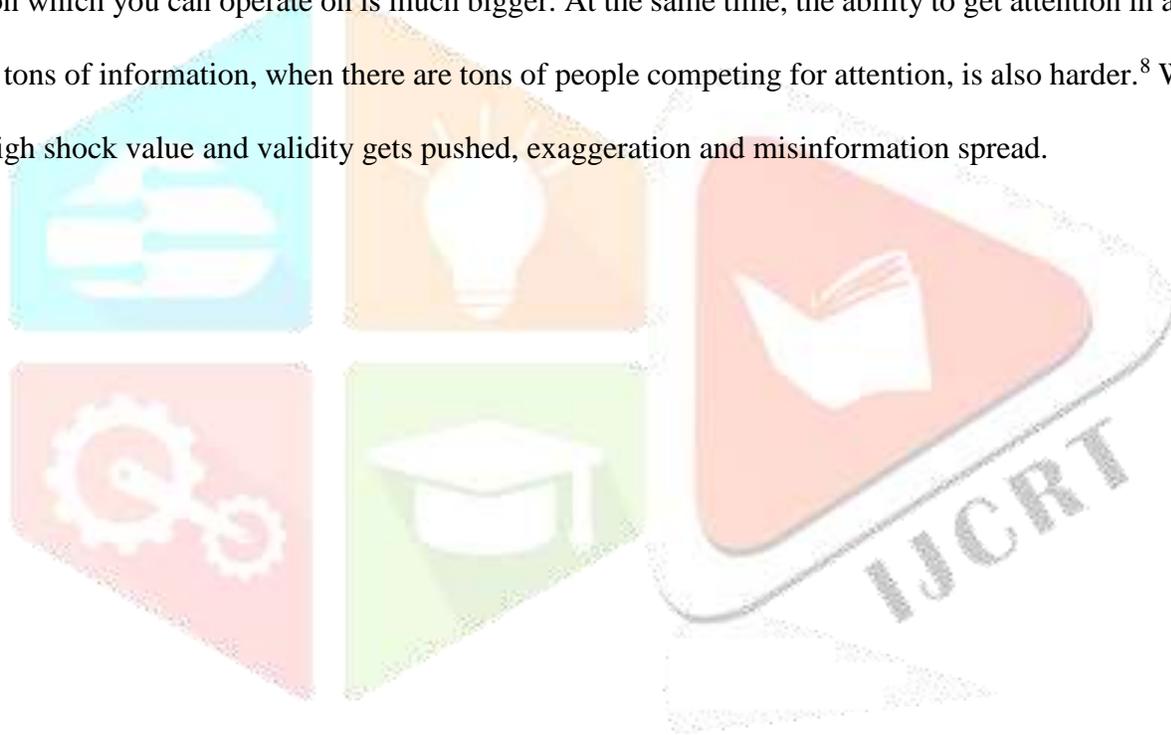
[7] Kuo, J. R., Fitzpatrick, S., Ip, J., & Uliaszek, A. (2022). The who and what of validation: an experimental examination of validation and invalidation of specific emotions and the moderating effect of emotion dysregulation. *Borderline personality disorder and emotion dysregulation*, *9*(1), 15. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40479-022-00185-x

[8] Rushkoff, D., & Kougan, F. (Directors). (2014). Generation Like [Film]. Frontline.

Reality

Emotional Response

Strong feelings draw a person in. The Valence Arousal Dominance (VAD) model describes the combination of the three aforementioned factors– Arousal, Dominance, and Valence– and what emotions come out of it. For instance, high arousal and high dominance were often

Common Emotional Combinations in Viral Images
When both arousal and dominance are high, positive emotions result.

accompanied by overwhelmingly positive emotions and the element of surprise. Content with high emotions statistically received high virality.[9] A paper from the University of Pennsylvania "What Makes Content Go Viral?" by Jonah A. Berger and Katherine L. Milkman analyzed which New York Times articles were most likely to be shared. They found that content with polarized valence was more likely to be shared than content that does not evoke emotion, than content that didn't. However, content that had high valence did better than content with low valence.

Rather than offering the promise of solace to appease human curiosity, most creators on social media take to sensationalism. In the research paper "A Qualitative Analysis of sensationalism in Media" by William B Frye, Frye analyzes how sensationalism and specific wordings are utilized in journalism, something that shapes a widespread and well-known narrative. He describes sensationalism as "defined as a way in which news organizations can make the news more exciting for the audience[.]". And lists common risks as "...dangerous when facts are stretched and emotional elements are emphasized." [10]

The same may be applied to consuming content. A Daily Dose of Internet is a YouTube channel that went viral in 2020. Their content included high surprise mundane content. However, the surprise triggered an adrenaline rush, and the resolution involved a dopamine hit.

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[9] Jones, K., Libert, K., & Tysnski, K. (2016, May 23). *The emotional combinations that make stories go viral*. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2016/05/research-the-link-between-feeling-in-control-and-viral-content

[10] Frye, William B., "A qualitative analysis of sensationalism in media" (2005). Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports. 3218. https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/3218

This leads to an easy proliferation of misinformation, something that is also the outcome of many exaggerated news articles and videos. They count as high shock value content since they trigger emotions. It's comparable to the reason why individuals enjoy drama and dramas so much. Drama is the third highest-grossing genre of movie in North America.[11] A study found that watching dramas released endorphins.[12] Endorphins are natural pain-relievers released by the brain's hypothalamus and pituitary gland in response to pain or stress. Endorphins give a feeling of general well-being; beta-endorphins being the most well-studied are released when individuals partake in intercourse, laugh, etc. Endorphins are addictive in the same way as opioids– opioids are meant to mimic the feeling of endorphins. [13] Therefore, when dramas or high-shock value content release endorphins, it becomes something people may crave, enjoy, and develop a craving for.

Mean World Syndrome

High shock value content has led to the development of a phenomenon known as Mean World Syndrome. Mean World Syndrome is a term coined by George Gerbner during his time at the University of Pennsylvania. "Mean World Syndrome focuses specifically on Gerbner's views about how pervasive exposure to media violence affects attitudes, perceptions of, and attitudes, towards the real world… his central idea—the "cultivation hypothesis"— reveals that those who watch more television are more likely to regard the real world according to the themes and messages most recurrent in what they absorb from the world of television."[14] The result is a skewed perception of reality, wherein the individual perceives reality to be more violent and dangerous than it is.

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[11] U.S. & Canada: film genres by total box office revenue 2023 | Statista. (2023, September 25). Statista.
https://www.statista.com/statistics/188658/movie-genres-in-north-america-by-box-office-revenue-since-1995/

[12] Dunbar, R. I., Teasdale, B., Thompson, J., Budelmann, F., Duncan, S., van Emde Boas, E., & Maguire, L. (2016). Emotional arousal when watching drama increases pain threshold and social bonding. Royal Society open science, 3(9), 160288. https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.160288

[13] Harvard Health. (2021, July 20). Endorphins: The brain's natural pain reliever. https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/endorphins-the-brains-natural-pain-reliever

[14] The Mean World Syndrome - Educational Media Reviews Online (EMRO). (n.d.).
https://emro.libraries.psu.edu/record/index.php?id=4063

With the constant influx of information at the fingertips of most people in society, practically all hours of the day, and social media promoting high shock value content, the ability to fall under "Mean World Syndrome" is rising exponentially and is at a worrying high in first world countries.

As such, conspiracy theories become far more prominent in recent years - from Pizzagate, a conspiracy theory that rapidly spread through social media about a pizzeria having a secret underground child sex trafficking ring connected to the democratic party and led to an armed man getting arrested[15], to the genocide in Myanmar having ties to facebook brainwashing. Small subconscious alterations in media presented to users shapes opinions.[16]

Friend Recession
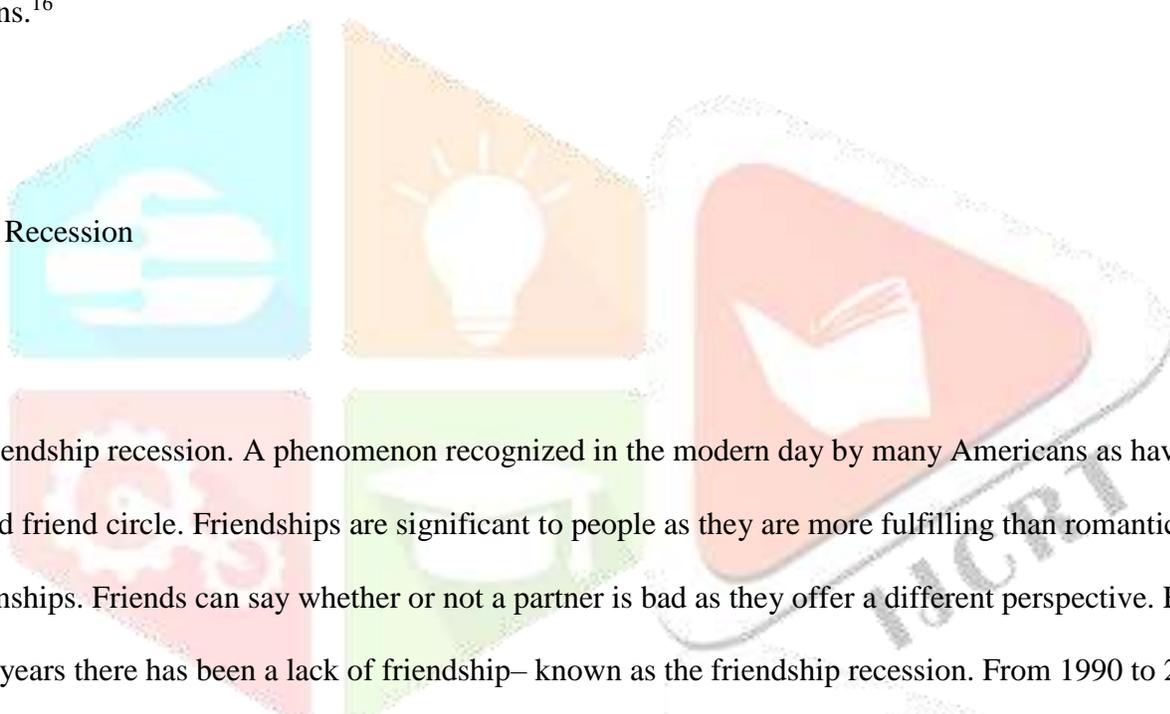
The friendship recession. A phenomenon recognized in the modern day by many Americans as having a reduced friend circle. Friendships are significant to people as they are more fulfilling than romantic relationships. Friends can say whether or not a partner is bad as they offer a different perspective. However, in recent years there has been a lack of friendship– known as the friendship recession. From 1990 to 2021 there has been a steep decline in the number of close friendships in Americans according to the Survey Center on American Life, around 33% of Americans reported having 10 or more close friends, while the number dropped to 13% in 2021. On the flip side, only 3% of Americans reported having no close friends in 1990, but in 2021 the number dramatically increased to 12%. While the loss of friendship could be attributed to the social isolation stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, "broader structural forces may be playing a more important role. First, Americans are marrying later than ever and are more geographically mobile than in the past—two

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[15] Samuelson, K. (2016, December 5). What to know about Pizzagate, the fake news story with real consequences. TIME. https://time.com/4590255/pizzagate-fake-news-what-to-know/
[16] Netflix social dilemma `

trends that are strongly associated with increasing rates of self-reported social isolation and feelings of loneliness - Americans are working longer hours and traveling more for work, which may come at the cost of maintaining and developing friendships."[17]
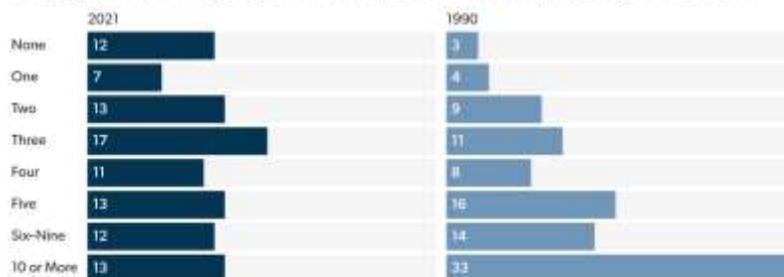
"We've seen this widespread national decline in civic and social … places where people would come together regularly in sort of a structured environment," Dan Cox, director of the Survey Center on American Life, says. "In fact, perhaps reflecting its central place in the hierarchy of American social life, Americans are now more likely to make friends at work than any other way—including at school, in their neighborhood, at their place of worship, or even through existing friends."[18] There's been a steep decline in friendship with the rise in technology. Many Americans now report spending more time either at the workplace or with their children, resulting in a lack of time spent at community centers or with friends. 22.2% of workers in America worked from home and 14.7% worked from home more than five days a week pre-covid, 2017-2018,[19] This trend of working from home has proven to be a contributing factor to the friendship recession.

"The trickiness of social media is it gives us these snacks of connection, And it's like we've been subsisting on snacks of connection from social media rather than having the sort of nutrient-dense meal of in-person connection." according to Maria Francisco.[20] Not only does spending time online take away from time that could be spent on in-person interactions,it also leads to a subconscious expectation created by the consistent consumed media by being on the internet so much that it sets up an expectation of what friendships should be

[17] The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss - The Survey Center on American Life. (2022, April 7). The Survey Center on American Life. https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/

[18] The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss - The Survey Center on American Life. (2022, April 7). The Survey Center on American Life. https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/

[19] Statista. (2024, February 22). Remote work in the U.S. - statistics & facts. https://www.statista.com/topics/7145/remote-work-in-the-us/#topicOverview

[20] Why Americans are Spending Less Time with Friends — And What to do About it - The Survey Center on American Life. (2022, December 21). The Survey Center on American Life. https://www.americansurveycenter.org/commentary/why-americans-are-spending-less-time-with-friends-and-what-to-do-about-it/

like. Unrealistic standards have detrimental effects and create a lack of understanding within people as individuals are no longer willing to put in the effort into friendships.

Trauma Dumping Culture and Mental-Health Matters Derailment

Romanticizing Mental Disorders

Mental health professionals and enthusiasts alike have taken to social media to educate others about tackling the stigma surrounding mental health. However, ever since 2020 and the boom of the Mental Health Matters movement, there has also been an uptick of self-diagnosis and taking advantage of people's increasing attention and romanticization of illnesses.

Examples include an uptick of mainly females claiming to have Tourettes syndrome or some form of ticks, Borderline Personality Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and more. It stems from the surface-level understanding of the disorder. Many people either create a placebo effect for themselves or think it to be an escape for unwanted behaviors by claiming they can't control it. In most cases it's a mix of both.

Communities of Romanization

Unfortunately, not only is this uptick unhealthy but the romanticization can lead to detrimental acquisitions of the disorder. Examples include SHTwT and EDTwT. SHTwT stands for Self-Harm Twitter, while EDTwT is similar but deals with eating disorders respectively. Neither of them is for spreading awareness of the issue but rather a rabbit hole of promoting, enabling, and romanticizing self-harming and anorexic/bulimic behaviors. The more prominent of the two is EDTwT. Those romanticizing the disorders and joining the communities will often develop the disorders themselves.

Due to the nature of social media algorithms, a user may follow content whose consumers may also consume the former content, for instance, involvement in SHTwT and EDTwT is heavily prevalent in those who are in K-Pop fanbases. A person may receive such content on their feed and by interacting with it will fall into that side of twitter as well, thereby desensitizing the person and causing the proliferation of the disorders through the normalization and promotion of such cultures.
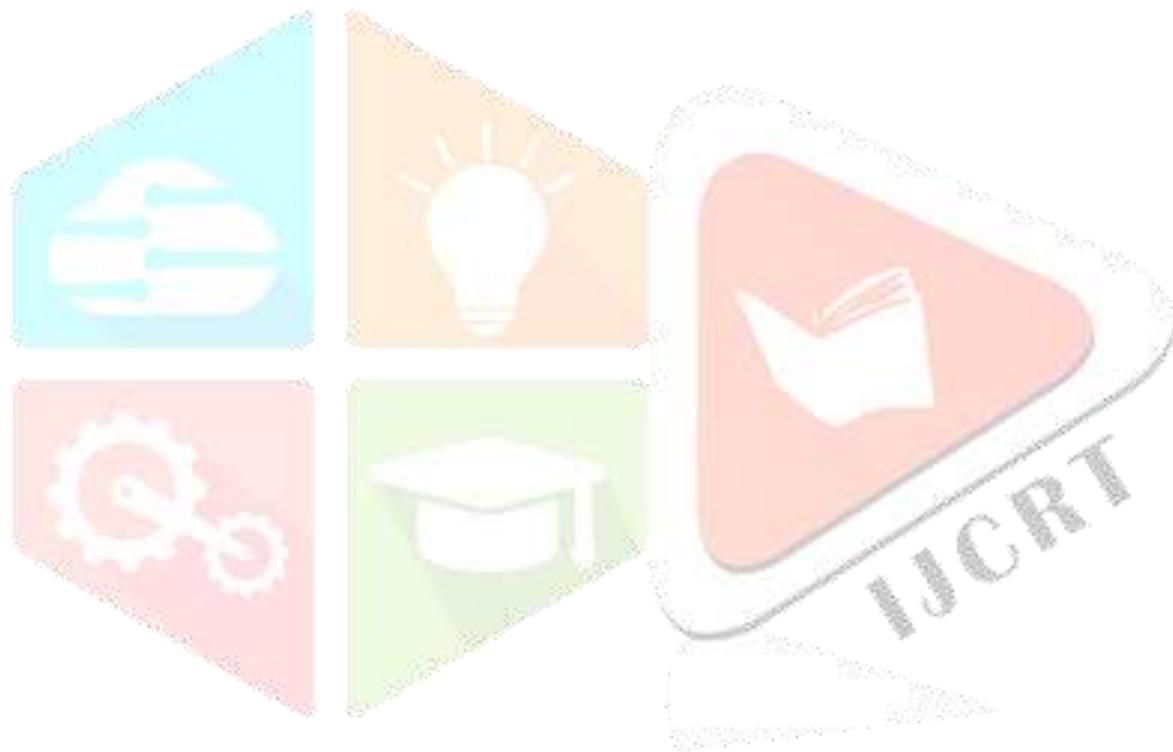
Glossary

A

Arousal

Degree of intensity of an emotion

B

Borderline Personality Disorder

a disorder caused by prolonged and intense childhood trauma, causing long term emotional instability such as intense emotions, self-destructive behaviors, and issues with abandonment

C

D

Dominance

Degree of control exerted by a stimulus

E

F

G

H

Individualism

A way of life involving being self-reliant and putting one's own needs first

Internalization

the action of accepting or absorbing an idea, opinion, belief, etc. so that it becomes part of your character

J

K

L

M

Microtrend

N

O

P

Positive Attention

Psychotherapy

Q

R

S

Sensationalism

Using exaggerated narratives or language to entice the public, often at the expense of accuracy.

Shock Value Content

The deliberate use of provocative, controversial, or unexpected imagery, messaging, or actions in advertisements with the aim of evoking strong emotional responses from the audience

Subculture

A smaller sect within a culture that differentiates itself on a variety of factors

T

Third Place
A place separate from the home and work wherein which community is fostered (i.e. Church, Gym, Theatre, Coffee Shop)

U
V
Valence
Pleasantness of a stimulus
Validation
Recognition or affirmation that a person or their feelings or opinions are valid or worthwhile; often garning a sense of acceptance in a social setting
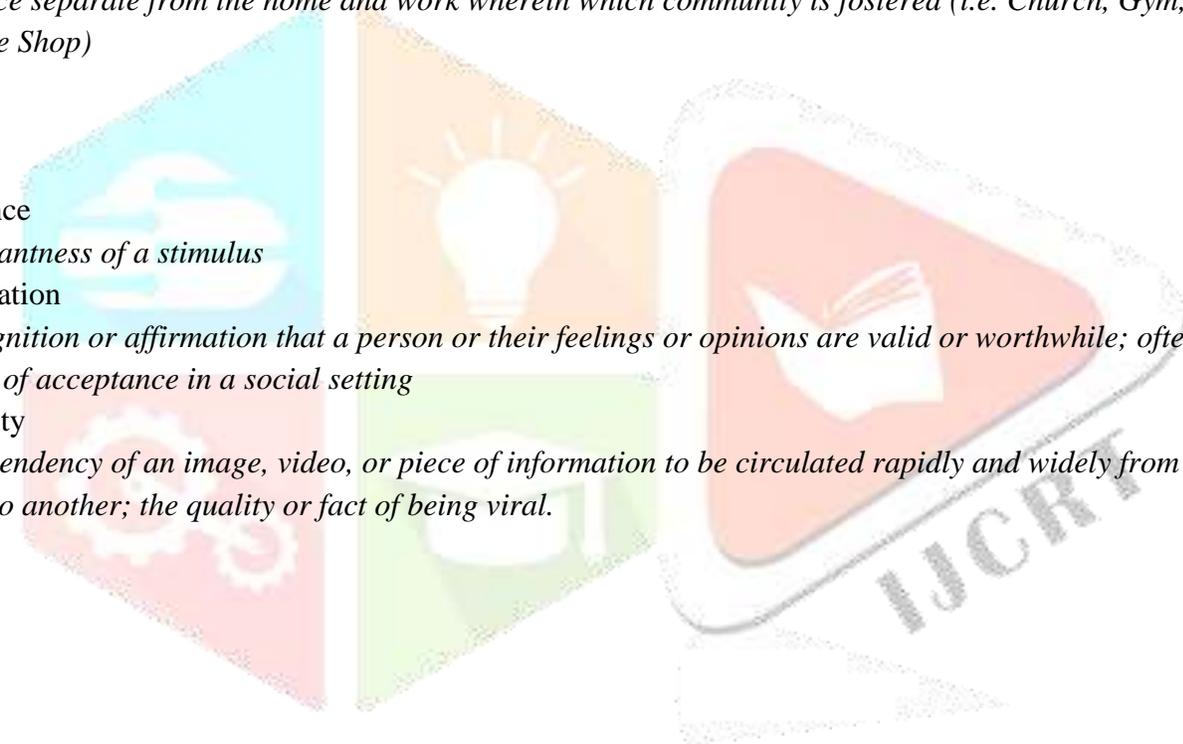Virality
The tendency of an image, video, or piece of information to be circulated rapidly and widely from one internet user to another; the quality or fact of being viral.

W
X
Y
Z

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