Antisocial Media

What would life look like without social media? Would our life be more straightforward, more productive, focused, maybe even more enjoyable? Would the need to take photos just disappear? Or would we all be lonely and isolated, ignorant and bored? Many people would dread the idea of having their social accounts deleted; for some it may cause significant distress. And no wonder, for many it has become a big part of our lives. Yet should this worry us?

The science behind the design of social media apps uses the tricks of the gambling industry to create psychological cravings similar to that of cocaine. For example, the small, constant and instant gratification that social media provides releases a chemical in your brain called dopamine. That's why every time someone likes or comments something flattering on your photo or post, or every time you get a text, you will feel good. So when you get lonely you post more photos or more stories, maybe send more messages because it feels good when you get a response. We associate these likes, views, comments etc. as a reward for our social media actions, and this tempts us to re-invest. It is these repeated cycles of trigger, action and reward that cause our brains to gradually remap themselves until we develop a habit. We can easily see the parallels between social media and gambling.

Once a habit is formed something previously prompted by an external trigger, like a notification, is no longer needed. It is replaced with an internal trigger meaning that we develop a *mental dependency between wanting to use a social app and seeking to serve an emotional need*. It is here that social media acts like a slot machine, we cannot know when we will be rewarded, and we usually don't find anything gratifying when we invest our time on social media, much like gambling. But it's precisely this uncertainty and anticipation that keeps us coming back. As the first president of Facebook Sean Parker said, *"You're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology and we the creators understood this."* Social media indirectly generates income via continuous consumer attention, which is measured in clicks and time spent. So once you are locked in a cycle of addiction you are now a product of the social media giants, selling your attention to the highest bidding advertiser.

Losing touch

This process of addiction disables your mental functions for natural social interactions. To fulfil our social desires we are no longer turning to real-life social interactions, instead, we turn to one of our many social media platforms. And no wonder, it's easier and quicker. Every signal, heart, like or thumbs-up is a short term reward, one which cannot be so easily obtained in real-world relationships. Since this reward is easily measurable and comparable we equate this with value instead of what it truly is: fake popularity which leaves you even emptier than before. Social media does not give us the same richness of a community in life. This dependency can gradually cause you to end up losing touch with the real world and real people.

A lot of young adults find it extremely difficult to interact with others and it's no surprise. When you're with your friends but sitting on your phone attempting to get a social buzz from people who are not there, maybe you've got a problem. Notice how as soon as people are waiting for something in a public setting they don't chat, that's become awkward, they get their phones out, it's easier. We are more dependent on it for social interaction. The former vice president of user growth at Facebook said: *"the Dopamine-driven feedback loops social media has created are destroying how society works by eroding the core foundation of how people behave by and between each other."*

Slaves to the algorithm

Our identity is found in the things we depend on. To define your identity according to people's response to you on social media is to become vulnerable to all the social pressures associated with that. We are deeply sensitive to social status; we want to be accepted and approved by others. We hate that people won't accept us for who we truly are, but we spend most of our time on social media trying to convince people we are someone we are not. The power of what others think has proven to be strong enough to influence our behaviour or decisions, sometimes rightly, sometimes not, but the problem begins when other people's opinions about us become our sole concern.

Social media provides a spectacular platform that allows you to continually monitor your' social standing': how many people like, watch or follow your social life and how much attention you're getting, and we often become anxious about it. If you post something but don't get many likes or much attention for it you might not bother with that thing again. But if you post something more explicit and get more likes or views for it then you're likely to repeat that, whether it's honourable or not. We start to ask ourselves how we can get more followers, likes or views. We look to those on social media with ten times our social following, subconsciously judging them to be more successful because of that, despite the fact they likely have little or no relationship with the majority of their followers. It's a poor form of pride. It sounds sensationalist but we really do start to become slaves to the algorithm.

"He trusts something that can't help him at all. Yet he cannot bring himself to ask, 'Is this idol that I'm holding in my hand a lie?'"

The issue unresolved

If we're honest with ourselves, what drives many to social media in the first place is the fear of being forgotten or missing out on "life", but life is not something that can be lived in the servers of a mega-corporation. The allure of social media is the desire to be seen, and if not affirmed, at least put in view of others. Isn't that what social media is for – self-projection and self-affirmation? Social media is there to make the world more connected and yet the research reveals a world that is not more connected, but instead suffers from a heightened sense of isolation.

It appears social media although intended to cure our loneliness, has only mutated a new form of it. You must decide how much of your intellectual independence you're willing to give; maybe you can find a good balance to benefit from social media without becoming partly dependent. But if not my solution is simple: don't use the social tools which are designed to addict and based on self-projection and self-affirmation (Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok...), instead stick to social apps that are primarily for communication than anything else (WhatsApp, Skype...).

Beneath it all

Alongside our fear of being forgotten is the fear of silence. We run to social media, music and other forms of entertainment to avoid having to be alone, silent with ourselves. The brutal fact is that we are bored with ourselves and so we seek new noise to avoid ourselves.

Where there is silence there is no distraction; the mind is given the ability to breathe and truly think. Silence allows uncomfortable truths to flood back into our mind. Who we are, who we have become, everything about our lives from the good, the bad, the ugly and the boring all rise to the surface. Taking and sharing new selfies, scrolling through endless photos of 'junk' is always more comfortable than the fearful unknown of what will emerge if everything becomes silent.

Serious solitude in the media age can feel unnatural and uncomfortable. But solitude, settling into the quiet place of our lives, allows our deepest needs to be exposed and once again allows us to focus on the truth that governs our lives. In the Christian view, silence is not merely a bitter experience but rather is an invitation to clarity.

King David wrote, "*For God alone, O my soul, waits in silence, for my hope is from him*". *Isiah echoed this and wrote, "In quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*"