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# An Exploratory Character Analysis of Michael Scott

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**L**et's be honest: Michael Scott is an imbecile. He promised an entire high school class free college tuition with no ability to actually pay for it. He hit his employee with his car and then said, "Don't worry, it's only Meredith." He is constantly mean to Dwight, despite his loyal servitude. He frequently messes up other peoples' property for the sake of being funny. On paper, it's all there: Michael is a kind of an asshole.



But the loyalty that Michael Scott has is unmatched by most other fictional

characters. To those who can't stand the show because of him, I can see why. But something is addicting about the atmosphere that is *The Office*, and Michael's ignorance is why it works so well.

So, whether you're a new fan or an old fan, I'm eager to shed some light on the character that is Michael Scott. My goal is to successfully explain with clues from the show that the way he acts can be traced back to the nature of his childhood.

## How Michael Scott's Character Came to Be

**T**hose who have seen *The Office* are familiar enough with the antics that Michael Scott brings into his employees' daily lives. But the show started a little too strongly with his character — so much that the creators had to take a step back even to gain the chance of renewal.

In the first season, the funny moments were hard to see past the awkwardness. Michael wasn't the relatable or humorous character the writers were hoping for. Many viewers had a hard time grasping what the show really was. So when it aired, the network wasn't really behind the show anymore. Creator Greg Daniels knew he had to recreate Michael Scott's character into something just a little bit more likable.

But while he needed to be more likable, he also still had to be absurd.

Around this time, Steve Carell just finished filming *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, which brought hundreds of thousands of viewers to *The Office*. Michael Schur, one of the primary writers of the show, agreed that Michael Scott needed a change. He said:

*I watched The 40-Year-Old Virgin, and the reason we're back is largely because of The 40-Year-Old Virgin. We need to take 20% of what is so endearing and likable about that character and swirl it into Michael Scott, and we need to take 20% of the optimism of that movie and swirl it into the show. And I want every episode to end with a little upswing.*

The key to the show's success turned out to be just that — the upswing. Each episode had to end on a positive note, which would ultimately redeem Michael's

character. The viewers had to forgive Michael, no matter how ridiculous he'd acted.

## Okay, But...Did Recreating Michael Scott Work?

**L**e't's refer to *Diversity Day*, the episode after the pilot. Michael retells a hilarious comedy routine he caught on TV the night before. This happened to be the famously controversial Chris Rock routine, which had several N-word drops and references. After complaints are sent to Corporate, they hire a special consultant, Mr. Brown, to come in and teach about racial tolerance and diversity.



Michael's version of Diversity Day training

Michael is incredibly insulted that he's why the seminar was conducted. So he sends Mr. Brown out of the office to conduct his own version of Diversity Day. He instructs everyone to wear index cards with a certain race on it and asks that they treat each other how they might treat people of those races.

While a hilariously awkward concept, *Diversity Day* wasn't well-perceived when it aired.

Now, let's fast forward to season two episode *Booze Cruise*. At this point, the writers are in full swing and have established the setting and characters. The third season had already been ordered, and there was plenty of confidence that this show could succeed.

But why? What changed?

Michael Scott did. Because the writers changed the formula, Michael was no longer a mindless bigot — he had a big heart with good intentions. Still, his social ineptness allowed him to appear extremely politically incorrect. But, as promised, at the end of each episode, Michael had a redeeming moment that reminded the viewers why they should root for him after all.

## **Breaking Down Michael Scott's Character**

*It's like, he would put his foot in his mouth all the time, but in a lot of ways, I don't think he ever valued one type of person over any other. And in that way, I think he was a very pure character because he was very dumb in terms of political correctness and being appropriate in public. But at the same time, I just don't think there was a hardness in his heart towards anyone. — Steve Carrell*

**A**fter dozens of rewatches, I've become inspired to really sit down and think about Michael's character. So, citing scientific studies and data from reputable sources, I'll analyze Michael Scott and explore how his childhood has likely affected the way he operates as an adult.

### **#1: Michael Hates Rules and Authority**

**E**arly on, we learn about Michael's hatred for Scranton's human resources representative, Toby Flenderson. A popular theory is because Toby technically works for Corporate, which means he has to enforce certain rules within Michael's "fun" workspace.



Rule-making often comes with authority, which is probably why Michael also disliked his former boss, Ed Truck. Much like how a kid doesn't understand why rules exist to benefit everybody, Michael only hears reinforcements from those who have power over him. Ed and Toby likely remind Michael of authority figures from his childhood, like parents or teachers who would infringe on his freedoms.

Michael reacts so negatively to authority because of something called psychological reactance. Psychological reactance is our brain's response to a threat to our freedom. It forms an angry reaction where a person might rebel and do the opposite of what they're asked to do. We use psychological reactance every day to respond to things like advertisements, which hardly work on consumers. It's because people have a natural hatred for being told what to do.

Here's a good example of Michael's psychological reactance with Toby: In Moroccan Christmas, Michael wants to have an intervention for Meredith after she drunkenly lit her hair on fire during the office's annual Christmas party. Toby quickly says that they're only legally allowed to discuss her work performance. Of course, Toby succumbs as Michael proceeds with the intervention anyway:

**Michael:** [reading from a pamphlet] “Have you ever, under the influence of alcohol, questioned the teachings of the Mormon Church?”

**Toby:** Where did you get this?

*Michael: I got it on a website. That's not important.*

*Toby: Michael, we should contact some experts. You don't know what you're doing.*

*Michael: Okay, you know what, Toby? One of my employees is undergoing a crisis, and I wish, for just once, you would take my side on this. I'm doing your job, man.*



This is a classic workplace psychological reactance. If an employee is told that they can't do a certain task or behavior without risking his job, then that employee might start doing something similar to the restricted action. It's sort of like finding a loophole and saying, "Well, you didn't say I couldn't do it *this way*," which is what Michael demonstrates above.

Another example is in *The Lover*, when Michael begins dating Pam's mother, Helene. Pam is obviously distraught by this news and orders him to stop dating her. Michael demonstrates reactance when he says, "You know what? I'm going to start dating her even harder!"

While both children and adults can present this type of resistance, Michael may tie his problem with authority back to his stepfather, Jeff. We don't really learn a lot about Jeff throughout the show, but we know that Michael didn't want him to marry his mother.

But why does Michael have such a detestation to authority and rules? I think this directly correlates with Jeff's parenting style. There are four parenting styles you should be made aware of:

- **Authoritarian:** Strict, disciplinary, cold parenting
- **Authoritative:** Warmth, love, with a healthy set of limits
- **Permissive:** Not demanding, few responsibilities, children regulars their own behavior
- **Uninvolved:** Neglectful and uninterested in child's needs

My theory is that Jeff was an authoritarian, which is the parenting style that's all about being strict and demanding obedience. It's a very "children should be seen and not heard" type of mentality. Oftentimes, these parents are less responsive and affectionate to their children.

One parenting organization suggests that children of authoritarian parents are at a higher risk of developing self-esteem problems because their opinions aren't valued. Perhaps Michael's relationship with Jeff was complicated because of his authoritarian parenting style, which later translated into Michael disliking rules as an adult.

## #2: Michael Loves Being the Boss, But Isn't a Very Good One

*"Ed Truck, yuck. Ed Truck was the manager before me. Horrible. He hated fun. It was like, 'Oh, Ed Truck is walking toward us. Stop having fun. Start pretending to do work.' What a jerk. You know what? I swore to myself that if I ever got to walk around the room as Manager, people would laugh when they saw me coming, and would applaud as I walked away."*

**I**t's as clear as day that Michael loves being the branch manager. He takes such pride in his job and even bought himself his own "World's Best Boss" mug. He constantly talks about how it's his job to make his employees laugh and be their friend, even though it's clearly not.

Quite a few people try to get this through Michael's head. In *Business Ethics*, new HR rep Holly Flax is requested to join Michael for lunch to discuss Meredith's

unethical behavior.

*Holly: I'm saying that her behavior is unethical and a little icky and I don't think I want to work in an environment where that sort of conduct is tolerated.*

*Michael: Well, you have to tolerate a lot when you are part of a family.*

*Holly: It's not a family. It's a workplace.*



Another time, in *The Carpet*, Ed Truck also tells Michael to treat the office like a workplace:

*Ed: You're the boss. You can't expect everybody to be friends with the boss.*

*Michael: Yes, I can.*

*Ed: They'll always see you as a boss first.*

*Michael: But sometimes you love the boss like a father.*

*Ed: I'm not sure that ever happens.*



What's interesting here is that Michael quite literally tells his feelings about why he *truly* wanted to become a boss, and it's because he was seeking Jeff's approval. Later on, in *Counseling*, we learn a lot more about Jeff when Michael must undergo counseling sessions with Toby:

*Toby: We can play something more complicated if you like.*

*Michael: This is plenty complicated.*

*Toby: So you have played it before?*

*Michael: I've played it once or twice with Jeff.*

*Toby: Who's Jeff?*

*Michael: Jeff was my mother's boyfriend, who she married.*

*Toby: So, her husband, your stepdad?*

*Michael: Yeah, yeah. I guess I never thought about it that way, though.*

*Toby: Did you guys do much stuff together?*

*Michael: Yeah. You know what? He took me to a baseball game once, I remember. It was weird though. They took the pitcher out of the game. I felt really bad because the pitcher wasn't able to play with his friends anymore. But Jeff said that the manager was making a really good move, by taking the pitcher out. He really respected the manager.*



Michael views the office as a home instead of a workplace and his subordinates as friends and family instead of employees. We know that Michael likely became a manager to make Jeff proud, but it also sounds like Michael is desperate to create his own “family” and seeks it in all the wrong ways.

Furthermore, I also think part of Michael’s love for being a boss goes much deeper. Being a branch manager allows Michael to be accepted. As the boss, people are more likely to be nice to him — even if it’s just because their jobs are on the line.

### **#3: Michael Craves Acceptance, But This Obsession Makes Him Unlikable**

So, maybe Michael is obsessed with the boss status quo because of Ed and Jeff. But why does he feel the need to satisfy the *employees*?

By most standards, he’s not a people-pleaser because he lacks some important characteristics — like feeling responsible for how others feel and often apologizing — so then what is it that drives him? I would argue it’s the innate desire to be accepted by your peers, which comes from Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Michael is stuck in “love and belonging” seasons 1–7, before Holly’s return.

Humans crave emotional relationships, which helps drive their behaviors. According to Maslow’s theory, this can be satisfied by forming meaningful friendships and intimate relationships. But unfortunately for Michael, he wasn’t accepted by his peers growing up, which leads him to act inappropriately while seeking companionship as an adult.

A study found that when children who respond to their peers inappropriately may be at risk for rejection by peers in the future. As shown in *Take Your Daughter to Work Day*, there is proof that Michael had been struggling with finding his footing since he was a child:

**Ed R. Meow:** What’s your name?

**Little Michael:** Michael.

**Ed R. Meow:** Hi Michael, I’m Ed. What’s your favorite subject at school?

**Little Michael:** Recess.

**Ed R. Meow:** Recess. So, tell me, what do you wanna be when you grow up?

**Little Michael:** I wanna be married and have 100 kids so I can have 100 friends. And no one can say no to being my friend.



But Michael copes with this unhealthily as an adult. In *Golden Ticket*, he accidentally distributes five 10%-off coupons to Dunder Mifflin's biggest client, which will put a huge dent in the company's revenue. Instead of facing CFO David Wallace and admitting his mistakes, Michael convinces Dwight to take the fall. But when David surprisingly congratulates Dwight for "his" grand idea, Michael jumps back in and retakes credit, saying that he wants "all of the credit and none of the blame."



Another example is in *Did I Stutter?* when Michael leads a conference room meeting to talk about ways to “energize the office.”

*Michael: Stanley? You wanna help us out with that?...Stanley, earth to Stanley...*

*Stanley: Not me.*

*Michael: Yes, you. Come on, Stanley, put your little game down and join the group.*

*Stanley: No.*

*Michael: Stanley, we're havin' a little...*

*Stanley: Leave me alone, dammit.*

*Michael: We're havin' a little brainstorm session...*

*Stanley: DID I STUTTER?*

*Michael: ...Good, this is good. I'm going to grab a glass of water.*



After Stanley snaps at Michael, Toby comes into Michael's office and wants to talk about it. Michael denies anything is wrong. Admitting that Stanley was openly insubordinate is also accepting that Stanley doesn't like or respect him, which is something Michael doesn't want to believe.

But deep down, he knows that Stanley committed a fireable offense, and it's Michael's job to reprimand him for it. But what makes it worse is that he's afraid to confront Stanley — not because he's scared of doing his managerial duties, but because he's scared Stanley won't like him anymore if he does. On a whole personal level, Michael is seeking Stanley's acceptance.

And when Michael finally finds the strength to confront him, his true feelings come pouring out:

*Michael: [crying] I don't understand why you keep picking on me.*

*Stanley: Oh, for the love of God.*

*Michael: You just, do, and I don't know why, so... please help me understand.*

*Stanley: Fine. Here it is: you are a person I do not respect. The things you say, your actions, your methods, and style. Everything you would do, I would do it the opposite way.*

*Michael: Well Stanley, maybe you're feeling that you don't respect me because you don't know me very well.*

*Stanley: Michael I have known you a very long time, and the more I've gotten to know you, the less I've come to respect you. Any other theories?*

*Michael: All right, you don't respect me. I accept that. But listen to me, you can't talk to me that way in this office, you just can't. I am your boss. Can't allow it.*

Michael demonstrates a sense of self-awareness here, which is one of the few times we see past his emotionally-stunted exterior. But even so, it's clear that he has an innate desire to be accepted and liked by everyone. I theorize that this comes back to how his mother didn't help meet his basic social needs as a child.

A parent's responsiveness helps children realize that they are loved and accepted. But when parents reject their children, the children are at risk of multiple forms of maladjustment, like unworthiness, impaired self-esteem, depression, and a negative world view.

This might explain why Michael's mother is rarely mentioned in the show, and when she is, it's through less than enthusiastic anecdotes. Michael tells a story about how his "brother" — a foreign exchange student that lived with him as a child — stole all of Michael's jeans before going back home. Michael was then forced to wear shorts all winter. It's a funny story, but Michael's mother couldn't have bought him a single pair of pants?

Maybe Michael thought his mother brought in a foreign exchange student because she liked him better. This wouldn't be a far reach: In *Counseling*, Michael shares a story about when his dog ran away, he was afraid to go to the park in case he saw him playing with another child.

In summary, think Michael's desperation to be accepted by his peers comes from being rejected growing up. Michael utilizes his position as a boss to create a "family," where he can finally find that sense of belonging. Although it's entirely inappropriate and hardly ever works out for the better, it's the only thing Michael has.

## #4: Michael Is Selfish And Wants Everything to be About Him

**O**ne of Michael's most prominent personality downfalls is how selfish he is towards other people. Expecting the world to revolve around you is a common thought process for a child, but it appears that Michael never quite grows out of it.

In *Michael's Birthday*, Michael is absolutely thrilled to celebrate in the office. He makes the office carry him in a chair, a la the horah. He thinks the food delivery girl is a dancer, which makes him very excited and bashful. To Michael, his birthday is like a holiday. It's a day where, for once, everything can unapologetically be all about him.

Except it's not. On the same day as Michael's birthday, Kevin discloses to the office that he is awaiting skin cancer test results. He's supposed to get the call that day, so everybody in the office is careful to treat Kevin with extra attention and kindness. Michael is very jealous that the attention is suddenly taken away from him.

**Michael:** [notices Meredith hugging Kevin] *Hello, what about the birthday boy? Haven't had a hug all day.*

**Angela:** *No one cares about your birthday. Kevin's waiting to hear if he has skin cancer.*

**Michael:** ... Aww, that... sucks, great. ... Wow, that's good timing. That's... that's,

*sorry, that's terrible. Terrible news. That's terrible... terrible news for both of us [takes cake into the office and slams the door].*

Here, you can see that Michael corrects himself from sarcastically saying “Wow, that’s good timing,” to then appearing worried and apologetic. He’s aware of how he’s supposed to react to news like this, but couldn’t help but be clouded by how his own birthday was ruined.

In *Phyllis’ Wedding*, Phyllis asks Michael to roll her father’s wheelchair down the aisle at hers and Bob Vance’s wedding. Michael is more than ecstatic about this honor — he even equates it to basically “co-giving away the bride,” and as her employer, is essentially “paying for her wedding.” These are classic hints that Michael takes great joy in his relationship with his employees and offers great insight into how he desperately wants his own family one day.



As Michael rolls him down the aisle, her father suddenly stops and stands up out of his chair. He walks Phyllis the rest of the way, and the whole party cheers for his strength and dedication. But Michael does not: He is incredibly frustrated by this. In his eyes, this big moment was suddenly cut short. So, like a child, he pulls the wheelchair down the rest of the aisle and hits it along the guest pews and decorations.

There are numerous other examples of Michael finding a reason to act selfishly, but the core of each incident points to his childish insecurities. Children are naturally selfish creatures because their brains haven't developed enough yet, so what does this say about middle-aged Michael Scott?

Some psychologist resources suggest that adults who are selfish likely think that they don't have enough, even if they actually do. (Think about that time in *Niagara* when Michael didn't want to share his room with Dwight but expected Dwight to share it with him.)

For Michael, this seems like a viable explanation. While most people think humans are intuitively selfish, data points to the theory that selfishness is learned. We already know that Michael was deprived of acceptance by his friends and family growing up and hasn't had much luck in the years following either. This could lead him to claim a sense of ownership and deservingness, like having a single room or being a part of Phyllis' wedding. But his highly emotional reactions are not because he *wants* to upset other people — it's because he wants to be *important*.

## #5: Michael Is Rude, Outspoken, and Inconsiderate Towards Others' Feelings

**I**n *Chair Model*, Michael asks that the office writes down the names of single women that he could go on a date with after learning that a model in a chair catalog has died. Pam sets Michael up with her landlady, which Michael looks forward to until he meets her at the coffee shop. She's not the "hot, passionate love affair" that he was looking for.

**Pam's Landlady:** Well, I'm gonna head out.

**Michael:** Oh. Okay. Well, um, I enjoyed this, conversation. It was very nice. It was like talking to the sweet old lady on the bus.

**Pam's Landlady:** That's incredibly rude.

**Michael:** Now you ruined it. [walks out]



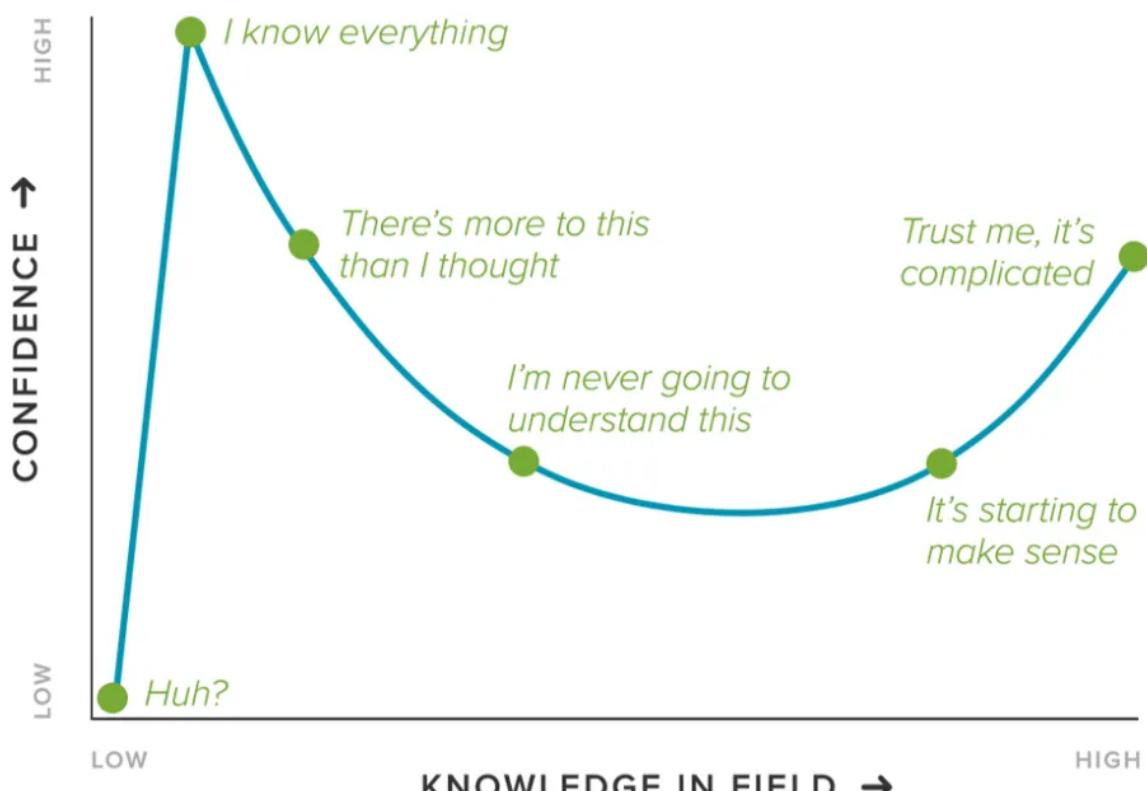
Throughout the show, Michael is also seen saying racist, homophobic, and sexist remarks. When people react negatively to his comments, he is genuinely confused about why they aren't laughing. This is a pretty incredible level of social unawareness. Michael doesn't "get" context, its clues, or where lines are being drawn.

This might be due to ignorance and incompetence, which are people who:

- Overestimate their skill levels
- Fail to recognize the skill and expertise of others
- Fail to recognize their own mistakes and lack of skill

This type of incompetence may be related to something called the Dunning-Kruger effect. The Dunning-Kruger effect is a type of cognitive bias by which "people with limited knowledge in a social domain greatly overestimate their own competence in that domain relative to the performance of their peers."

**Diagram 1: The Dunning Kruger Effect: “The miscalibration of the *incompetent* stems from an error about self, whereas the miscalibration of the *highly competent* stems from an error about others”**



Michael is, at most times, on the “I know everything” dot.

Let’s go back to when Michael got in trouble for retelling the Chris Rock standup routine. Michael’s ignorance and incompetence allowed him to retell the routine using the N-word, which could be a prime example of Michael overestimating his capabilities and failing to recognize his own mistakes.

He watches comedians who deal with the raunchy subject matter, and what makes it funny is the nuance to it. But Michael doesn’t understand nuance, so when he emulates those people, he says something racist.

But my burning question is: Where did Michael develop this level of ineptness? Is it truly just a matter of ignorance?

Let’s take a look at *Gay Witch Hunt* when Michael accidentally outs Oscar. Jan explains that coming out is an important time in an individual’s life, so after

Michael realizes he's offended his friend, he has a pang of deep guilt with a desire to make things right.

*Michael: Listen, man, I am so sorry. I had no idea.*

*Oscar: No, it's fine.*

*Michael: No. No, it's not. I feel terrible about it. I have been calling people "faggie" since I was in junior high, and I have never made this mistake. If I don't know how to behave, it is because I am just so far the opposite way, you know? I'm just... I, I can't even imagine... the... thing. Maybe we could go out for a beer sometime. And you could tell me... how... you do that to another dude.*

*Oscar: That sounds like a great, wonderful idea. Let's do that.*



Per this example, Michael may be just the epitome of an ignorant adult. He's the type of guy who lives to enjoy the grand things in life, which might include enjoying raunchy comedy specials and telling bad jokes.

But these are things that are not excusable in the 21st century, which is why Michael Scott's stupidity is so controversially addicting, and yet at the same time acts as the heart and soul of the show.

## My Final Thoughts

**T**here's a reason why *The Office* works, and it's because of Michael Scott.

While this exaggerated character would be nearly impossible to deal with in real life, people are drawn to the humility and humor he brings onscreen.

But even so, nearly every action and reaction of Michael's can be arguably traced

back to some childhood event or trained understanding that is canon to the show. Through anecdotes and small hints, it's clear that Michael's desire to be liked stems from the lack of security he received as a child. He was never taught how to cope or develop friendships, so he overcompensates by being socially obsessive as an adult. His sense of entitlement also leads him to come off as extremely rude and childlike in various social situations.

I'm not sure if the writers knew how far the show would go when they first started, but I think they nailed it when they wrote Michael Scott.

The Offic

Michael Scott

Character Analysis

Steve Carrel



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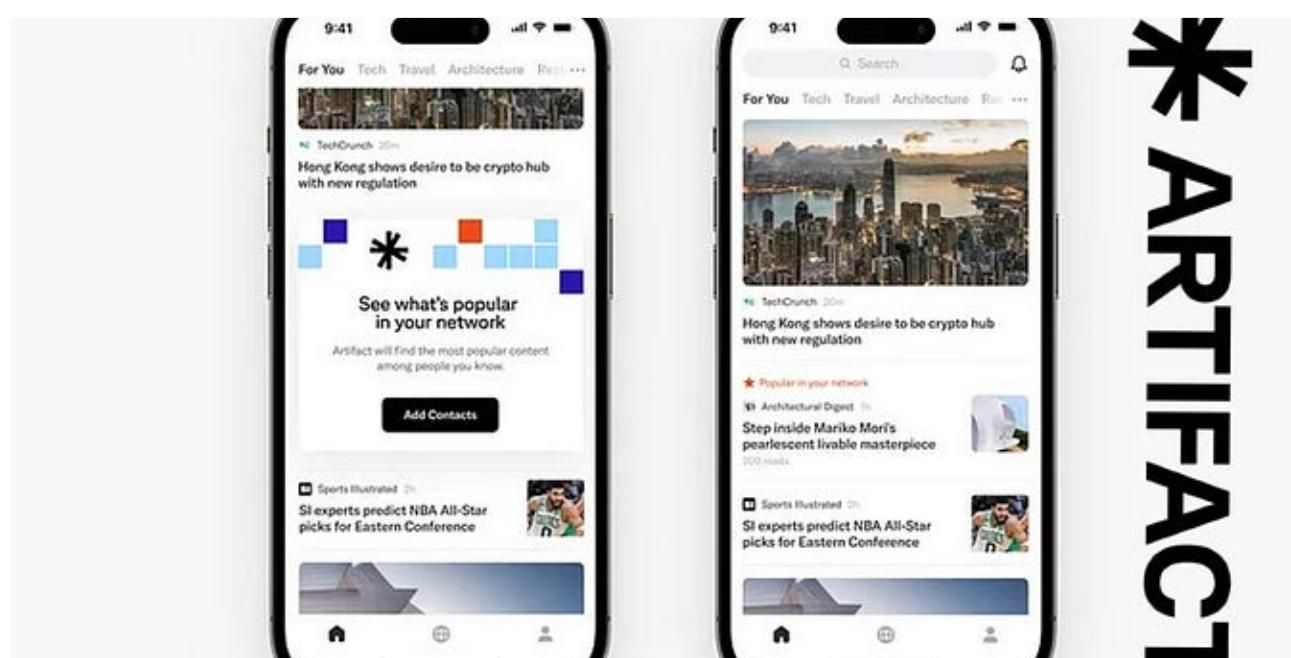
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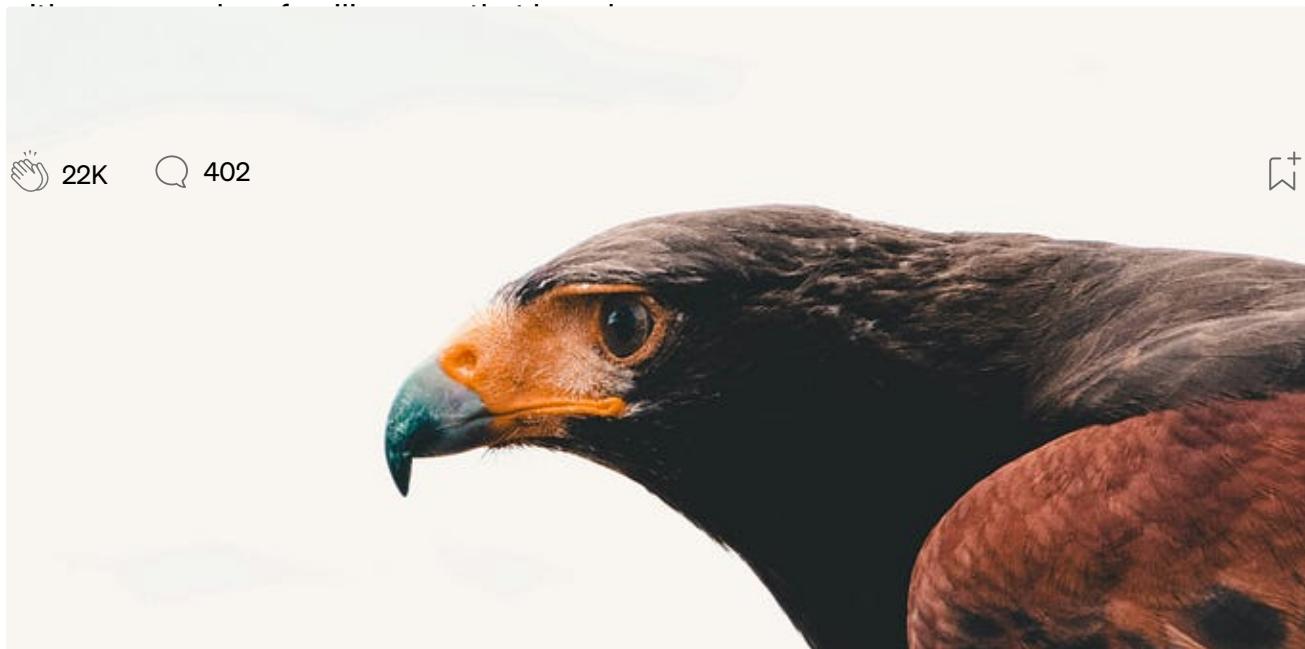
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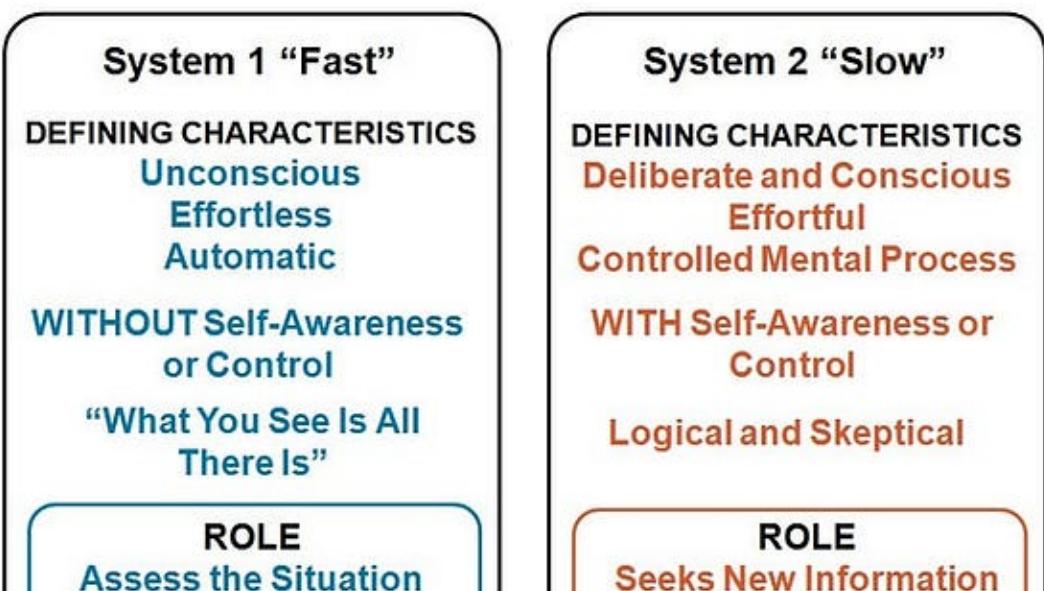
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