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Paper 2: Research-Based Synthesis

In the past few decades, digital technology has gone from being a small niche used by the military, scientists, hobbyists and geeks to an all-encompassing technology that permeates every aspect of our existence. From texting, to social media, to online banking, to delivery and even dating apps, this digital matrix seems inescapable and continually encroaching on the remaining fragments of our analog life. Like a walled garden, it continually grows and constricts us year-by-year. As a result of intentional manipulation of our insecurities and loneliness by corporations, influencers and content creators, and even our broader social circle who is dependent on this technology, we empower the very demons we try to expunge through these technologies, resulting in a self destructive cycle as these technologies become our only modicum of friendship, connection, and love in our lives. To fix the fracture and atomization within ourselves and the broader technology, we must change not only our habits, but also the very perspective from which we view these apps and ourselves.

Slipping under our notice, corporations, content creators and influencers battle for money, status and dominance, perpetuating glamorized and grossly exaggerated versions of themselves to out-compete each other. As the founder of a startup, Lashify executive Sahari Lotti was unaware of the corrupt nature of the industry. As she was advised by a mentor, for her products to be sold on the market “quality didn’t matter, nor did customer satisfaction - only influencers (Martineau 3). Competition is no longer about the quality, logistics, or even the price of products and services sold in the modern marketplace. Rather, it is a popularity contest, with likes, retweets, and endorsements of famous and well-respected people determining whether or not companies and individual entrepreneurs succeed. Much like in the real world, who you know is far more important than what you know or what you do. Specifically, it is who you can pay for: prices for endorsements are absurdly high, with very popular content creators charging “at least $40,000 per video”, and negative reviews “often from $10,000 to $30,000 more”(Martineau 12). Though fans believe these influencers to be “trusted experts, friends, and ‘real’ people"(Martineau 3) they can relate to, they are more akin to walking billboards, exploiting their trust to purchase extraneous products they may not like or even use. We are unaware, or at least consciously ignore the fact that these relationships are parasocial and used to fuel the luxurious livelihoods of these entities that appear to care for us. In our own desperate desire for connection, we ignore the flickering tongue from these snakes as they proclaim comforting messages. It seems that they tap into our psychological vulnerabilities of needing to connect and bond with others, a vulnerability that corporations exploit all too often to lure us into becoming dependent on their platforms and services.

Taking advantage of our insecurities and isolation, corporations give us the false promise of connection, bonding, and love by using their platforms. Facebook, one of the longest standing social media platforms, markets themselves as a way to connect and bond with others that you previously couldn’t. In their “Ready to Rock” 2020 Super Bowl ad, playing to the catchy beat of “I Want to Rock'', they displayed a collection of “rock” related groups back to back, overwhelming the viewer with the amount of possible groups they can choose from (Facebook). They are selling the idea that on their website or app, there is an almost infinite amount of groups to choose from, such that you are almost certain to find a group where you will fit in and belong. For many of us living in an age of sprawling suburbia, extreme car-dependence, and an atomized society, this seems like an extremely enticing offer. In our boring, monotonous and lonely lives, these digital platforms provide a fun escape where we can socialize and connect with others. Just like how Facebook markets bonding by forming digital communities and relationships, Twitter hooks our desire for belonging and excitement in their 2021 commercial Explore On Twitter: we are cut to a man running on a road in a wooded savanna, lost in the metaphorical wilderness of Twitter. The CEO pulls up to him and shows him how to ‘Explore’ on Twitter, and quickly a WNBA player, then an astronaut, a ninja, a musician boy, and pretty soon a whole crowd of associated characters are running alongside him that he is interested in. Through jokes, the CEO informs him his feed will adapt to his likes and interests, and ever changing trends will keep his content fresh (Twitter). Much akin to a public space or college campus in real life, Twitter sells this idea of its platform being a larger-than-life, dynamic ecosystem in which rapidly changing trends, famous and influential people, news, gossip, and dramatic or unusual personalities congregate. You can rally behind public trends to show your position and viewpoints, share interests and ideas with people scattered around the world, discover secrets, gossip, find news stories you wouldn’t know from traditional media, or watch funny animations, parodies or artwork from creative artists. They subtly imply that you are missing out on this interconnected, dynamic world exclusively on Twitter, making you anxious to join so you can be social, popular, and influential. Hacking our deep seated biological impulses, they manipulate us into joining their platform so they can profit from selling our data to advertisers.

However, these Big Tech companies not only exploit our desire for community, friendship, and belonging: they also exploit our even deeper, more fundamental psychological desire for love. Tinder, a dating app markets itself as the solution to the singleness and romantic relationship difficulties omnipresent in our society, but especially among the younger generations. One of Tinder’s India ads drops us into the lives of young people who are heartbroken from a breakup. Saddened and rejected, we watch as each of them initially copes with their breakup in isolation, only for family and friends to intervene. Slowly, joy starts creeping into their lives, and we watch as they progress from downloading Tinder, creating a profile, matching, dating, and getting into a new relationship, finding the love and happiness they just lost (Tinder India). Short snippets of Tinder are cleverly interspersed between each scene (and character), ingraining in the back of our head that this dating app will make us find ‘the one’ that will take away our sadness and replace it with happiness. By psychologically associating Tinder with the happiness and joy of these various characters find, it subtly leads you to fear being alone and missing out the love and happiness gained from using their app, a message even more powerful when you consider that this ad is targeted for young impressionable people who just had a breakup and are feeling especially down. They are desperate to fill the hole in their hearts, and Tinder is offering itself as a solution. Though it guises itself as a message of ‘hope’, it is quite predatory by taking advantage of people when their defenses are the weakest. In a world filled with atomization, insecurity, loneliness and a desperate lack of love, these digital companies advertise their platforms as a solution, magically fixing all of the problems present in the human condition, but really only care about their own bottom line. Hoodwinked, we fall into the traps that these digital platforms set up for us and become dependent on them, losing the very things these platforms promised to deliver us: friends, community, and bonding.

Having joined these platforms, we quickly become addicted to them as our lives revolve around the pleasure, attention, and solace they provide us. Once we join social media, we quickly find “like minded” people like us who “give us hearts and likes and follow us, providing that sense of validation and acceptance we so deeply yearn for in our mission of personal discovery” (Parton 3). Tricking our brain into thinking that we have been accepted to the communal campfire and danced with our tribe, we feel very good from the encounter. Because our brain is wired for maintaining social relationships, as failure to do so would mean death, social media effectively hacks our primal instincts to reward us for constantly using it. In fact, the reward is so powerful, that in one study “neuroeconomist Paul Zak had a 13.2% increase [of oxycontin] from only 10 minutes of Twitter usage - an amount comparable to a bridegroom at a wedding”(Parton 4). Like rats given dopamine to touch a button, we begin to associate social media with happiness, creating a habit from incessantly checking and monitoring it, constantly thinking of clicking on the app button for our next hit of dopamine. Subconsciously, we begin to question why we should work so hard in our ‘analog’ life to get attention and admiration when it is so much easier online. Why not follow the path of least resistance and greatest reward? After the first few hits, we begin to ‘learn’ how to cultivate this virtual persona so we can continue to get admiration by “erasing posts that people disagree with, rallying behind trending beliefs, and posting pictures that make us look more adventurous, attractive, or popular”(Parton 4). Compelled by the admiration that our friends, family, and even complete strangers give us on these platforms, we begin to escape reality to the digital world, where it is far more easy to get admiration, bonds and sexual gratification than in real life. We direct a massive part of our energy to this fake, perfect digital mask instead of improving our flawed and imperfect humanity. This mask becomes a different, perfected version of us, and like Narcissus, we cannot gaze away from this beautiful, gorgeous reflection of ourselves. Dating apps are similarly addicting: only 12 percent of people using dating apps get into a committed relationship, as the immense variety of choice results in choice paralysis, such that “many users can be seen displaying strong hesitations to commit to a singular option due to fears of missing out on a potentially better one”(Moyer 2). Surrounded by digital abundance, the endless options for a ‘better’ lover make the user feel like any choice they make will not be as good as ‘the one’ that they fantasize about. The matches and hookups “function as points to keep score”(Moyer 3), giving us bits of validation in the same way social media does with likes and comments. Users begin to validate themselves by their ‘body count’ and ‘matches’ instead of a genuine bond and emotional intimacy with another human being. They get lost in the ‘hit’ of using the app, forgetting the original reason they joined: to find a soulmate. Thus having developed this nasty habit, it takes control of our lives in a turn for the worse.

Now having become dependent, users become disconnected, fake, and mentally unwell, resulting in their lives being run into the ground. As users become more obsessed with our image on social media day by day, they become more distant from close ones, now becoming motivated by “what the British psychologist Pamela Qualter calls the “reaffiliation motive” to check your social media and see what your friends are doing”(Silard 3). Like a chain reaction, the more we use social media, the more we need it. Paradoxically, it both isolates and connects us at the same time, effectively making us dependent on the easy, convenient snacks it can deliver to us at will instead of the nutritious, healthy food we ate previously. It becomes a life support and slow poison, keeping us alive, yet draining our vitality day by day. Social media steals this energy and vitality that we once directed to our lives, instead making us fantasize about our ideal self and the endless possibilities available to us. As we become more and more attached to this false image to ourselves, the gap between how we present ourselves online and who we really are grows, and we turn into “a husk of our Shadow, a formless persona we don’t feel comfortable using to connect to others with because we don’t feel connected to it ourselves”(Parton 4). We are no longer authentic, living in constant internal turmoil because we know the life we portray online is a lie. Hiding under the shade of our mask, we feel uncomfortable going into the light to connect and bond with our fellow human beings. Too embarrassed over our own human limitations, we become afraid “our deceptions and flaws will be recognized within the mask”, resulting in our worst aspects taking over to “avoid admitting that we’re flawed, that we aren’t *really* our online mask”(Parton 5). Our internal conflict spills outward, damaging our friends, family and society at large. Like drug addicts, we hurt and push away the people around us from our self-destructive habits, caring more about the next “Heart” than breaking the hearts of those around us. Our pride gets the better of us, and instead of owning up on our mistake, we double down on it, blaming others for our misery. Thus, as a result we become even more desperately lonely while social media “dangles a life preserver if in front of [our] lonely, sputtering bod[ies]”, never being able to “make it back to the boat of human connection”, yet not having “the capability to swim away”(Silard 4). Like an abusive, narcissistic woman, social media consumes the life we once had so it can keep us for itself. In a disgusting, perpetuating cycle, the more we use it, the more we rely on it to connect with the people we disconnected with in real life. At this point, it is extremely difficult to kick the addiction, as it is the only tidbit of happiness in our lives that keeps us from going over the edge of despair. Not only do these attention stealing platforms suck us away from our friends and family, but they also damage those most dear to us: our romantic partners. The abundance of possible matches in online dating has created a “hotbed for cheating and non committal sex”(Moyer 3). Because of the sheer amount of people available to choose from, many users can instantly gratify their sexual desires by sleeping with a hotter, more charming person than the boring partner they’ve grown accustomed to. Because of this betrayal, both partners lose trust, resulting in hookups and flings replacing relationships based on bonds and trust. Because of the constant rejection, breakups, and lack of trust, “lowered self-esteem and feelings of objectification” become prevalent (Moyer 3). Our brains, wired for relationships that last at least a few years, simply can’t handle the amount of turmoil we go through when engaging in hookups. Like fast food, though it may be fun and enjoyable the first couple of times, it eventually takes its toll on us: our self-worth and belief of being more than hairy, primitive animals breaks down. To cope with this pain, we turn to the immediate pleasure of using these apps again. Much like social media, it is a vicious and self-destructive cycle if left unchecked, leaving us with nothing more than some shiny tokens and high scores to show. However, it is not impossible to escape this trap, and only by changing your perspective of both these online services and yourself can you overcome their addictive power.

To overcome our dependency to these online platforms, we must first treat these sites and apps as tools with advantages and disadvantages made by profit-oriented companies instead of gifts from the nerd gods and embrace a minimalist mindset. Once we are aware of the addictive and potentially destructive nature of these platforms in our lives, we realize that putting limitations on these technologies is not such an irrational idea. One basic tweak suggested by Dr. Anthony Silard would be to “put the apps you open multiple times daily - including all social media apps - onto your last screen”(Silard 5). By introducing a delay between the action and its reward, you are more conscious of the decisions you are making innumerable times every single day of your precious life to attempt to connect with others through your phone rather than in-person”(Silard 5). You bring to the forefront of your mind that this handset or monitor is dragging you away from the ones you hold so near and dear for pixelated words and likes on a screen. It makes you treat your digital device like a tool for specific tasks, rather than a portal to a digital matrix to escape to. Obviously, with more effort you can limit the reach of these attention corporations further: using an app or extension for a daily time limit, uninstalling the apps and using the browser versions instead, greyscale, minimalist apps, or using a full-on minimalist phone like the LightPhone, Wisephone, or even a flip phone. All of these, to a more extreme degree than the next, limits the capabilities of your phone (which is the primary way we use the services of attention conglomerates like Meta, Twitter, Tinder and Bumble) to weaken its addictive pull. Limit your relationship with technologies to ones where they more positively than negatively contribute to your purpose or dream in life. By weakening or even outright destroying the metaphorical Ring of Power that is these digital platforms, we de-digitalize and begin to “replace loneliness with real-time connection”, and “derive more enjoyment from the vast, beautiful world out there”(Silard 5). Instead of being this perfect, glamorized image on a screen to escape to, you revert back to the human, flawed person that you are with all their insecurities, loneliness, hopes and ambitions. As you work towards a happier, more minimalist lifestyle where you are not constantly incentivized to hide your imperfections, you can begin the process of psychologically healing and becoming whole.

After we have developed a healthy, beneficial relationship with technology, we must accept our own flawed nature and integrate our shadow to reconnect with the broad human experience. By embracing a digitally minimalist mindset, we have come to terms with our digital addictions, accepting that “we are the only ones to blame for our abuse of it”(Parton 5). By taking responsibility for our choices and admitting our faults, we bring an internal locus of control to our lives that empowers us to change. Instead of letting our screens determine our actions each and every day, we instead choose to engage with them on our own terms, forming the rudiments of a growth mindset and a determined conviction. No longer drowning our problems away through the numbing distraction of social media, we now have downtime to confront our Shadow, “engaging it without remorse and lessening its sway over our lives”(Parton 6). By coming to terms with our own darkness through introspection, meditation and creative outlets, we can concretely understand and heal the Shadow hiding in our Unconscious. Once we become aware of our own faults and accept them, we can descend from our ivory towers and not condescendingly judge others for their mistakes and faults. Now forced to interact with others face-to-face instead of hiding behind carefully worded DMs and curated posts, we can engage with others in “an honest and vulnerable way”, collectively bonding from us all “suffering from the whims of a merciless shadow”(Parton 6). Instead of status posting, fake support and public criticism online to make our persona appear good to anonymous strangers, we show genuine compassion and care that makes a real, impactful difference to individual lives. Witnessing us overcoming our own weaknesses and darkness, we give them the hope and encouragement to fight their own internal battles. If they have gone through hard times but made it out even stronger, why can’t I choose to rise from the ashes of my own despair and desolation like a phoenix, ready to take on whatever challenges life gives me? Our own hope and positivity will spread like wildfire to others, and pretty soon we will see others adopting the same mentality. Only then can we truly find what we were seeking when we joined these digital platforms in the first place: community, friendship, belonging and love.

Though we may not realize it during the moment, the actions and attitudes we have in life flow outward to affect those around us. The competitive, egotistical and deceitful nature of those running corporations, influencers, and various others who gain or are dependent on online social platforms spreads to others, pushing us into the vicious cycle of fakeness, narcissism and addiction inherent to these platforms by taking advantage of our most fundamental flaws and insecurities. Though our current cultural forces push us towards self-destructive habits, they are not unstoppable forces of nature. Only by collectively taking responsibility for our shortcomings and working with our weaknesses can we stem the current cultural tide and redirect our friends, local communities, and greater society to the track of enlightenment, love and acceptance. Having gone through my own personal difficulties while thinking up, planning out, drafting and revising this paper, I truly hope that the words I have written here will make a positive difference in the lives of those around me. Though our efforts may seem in vain now, every action we take and battle we fight will push out of our current darkness into the bright light of the future we all desire.

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