

# The Era of Participatory Social

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4-5 minutes

I get asked a lot what I'm looking for as a consumer investor in a consumer social world still dominated by Facebook.

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Facebook has never felt more vulnerable to me, and yet, the grip Facebook Inc has — with Instagram, WhatsApp, and of course Big Blue, is still as strong as it ever was. Still, when I look at products like Discord, Fortnite, Minecraft, TikTok, or Roblox, I can't help but believe that there is an opening for a new era of social — what I'll call participatory social.

Taking a step back, the first era of social — **Friendster, MySpace, Facebook — started out more like 99% read / 1% write.**

You'd go to someone's profile, view their content. You might comment on someone's post or wall or video, but the interaction model was almost entirely predicated on a passive consumption of someone else's content.

As Facebook evolved, adding comments, the newsfeed, the like button and then emoji reactions, Facebook intentionally pushed to increase the "write" side of the ratio in its base interaction model, but it was and always will be pushing against a rope. The atomic unit of content is predominately skewed towards an individual sharing something from their lives. This forces a skewed consumption model.

Facebook Groups is the closest Facebook has gotten to breaking away from this read-biased consumption model, both because the orientation in groups is not about an individual, *and* because it enables a level of privacy that a public forum does not (opening up more modes of participation). In my opinion it's the most disruptive thing Facebook has been successful at since Photos, but your Groups content is still mixed in with everything else — it's necessarily only a part of your Facebook experience. This leaves it vulnerable to a pure-play (e.g., Discord), much like Facebook had photos before Instagram came along.

And it's not just Facebook. So much of the digital experiences we spend time on have this passivity ingrained. Instagram, Netflix, YouTube. The result? We know from Facebook's **own research** that **passive experiences leave people feeling worse. It's when people interact with each other — when they actively participate in the digital forum — that they report higher levels of well being.**

We shouldn't be surprised by this. One of the core needs of humans is a sense of belonging. For centuries, religion, our tribes, our communities, our families have given us that sense, but modern culture, catalyzed by the internet, has broken down a lot of these connective tissues. And so we look *desperately* for other places for belonging, places where we can **participate** in some way, form an identity, and to Eugene Wei's brilliant piece, **pursue our status-seeking work.**

With Discord\*\*, Fortnite, all the messaging apps (Snap\*\*, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.), Minecraft, Roblox, and even TikTok, the core is more about the users *participating* in the experience. Discord's initial use case was gamers playing with each other and needing a better voice chat. Participation was intrinsic. Playing Fortnite, like all video games, is an active "lean in" activity, especially if you are doing it with friends which Fortnite so brilliantly enabled. What's so disruptive about TikTok's experience is how they pull people in to participate themselves with hashtags, memes, and duets, and further encourage that participation with ML-driven distribution. Minecraft and Roblox are at the core about creation and therefore participation.

So my belief and hope is: **participation** as the core interactive model will be the wedge that a new social experience uses to disrupt Facebook Inc. I look for this in new social startups, and I wouldn't be surprised if the biggest threat to Facebook Inc will be something that started looking like a game.

Be forewarned — Mark Zuckerberg knows and understands this deeply — it's why he's racing to adapt Facebook to be [less like a "town hall" and more like a "living room"](#). I hope a startup beats him to it — I think there is a huge opportunity to shepherd in this new era of social. And if you believe you are on the scent, don't be shy: I'm sarah at Benchmark dot com.

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