

Beyond the Filter - A journey of self-acceptance

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Abstract.

Social media has a huge impact on our daily lives. It's a way to pass time, organize the day or socialize and connect with others, however, the term "social media depression" is something we hear more often in this context. While everyone can have problems or feel stressed because of social media, those who suffer most from its content are the younger generations, those who are very susceptible and easily influenced by what they see and hear. Social media, while extremely helpful and fantastic in many ways, has a far darker effect on us humans, such as insecurity, fear of missing out (FOMO), depression, anxiety, cyberbullying, being distracted, or just plain bored from constantly having access to entertainment. Young people have especially become smitten with influencers and have an increasingly hard time to differentiate what is staged (the perfect, storybook look) and what is reality.⁽¹⁾ Being an influencer, or be like an influencer, has become something of a collective dream of today's modern life, the embodiment of a perfect life without stress and anxiety. These influencers have a beautifully styled home, an expensive car, perfect body, eat fancy food, wear clothes from expensive brands, have one hundred shoes, a cute dog, and always look flawless. Even their children are picture-perfect.

It's no wonder that teenagers and adults alike become hypnotized by the perfect photos and videos these influencers post, and it's equally unsurprising just how much of an influence they have on us. The objective of this project is to help teenagers, young adults, and even parents understand the possible side effects of spending too much time behind a screen, especially on social media, and the impact it can have on relationships, self-esteem, school, work and everything else we face in our daily lives.

How do we get their attention?

Before any other action can be taken, we need to think of how to reach out to the younger generation. The first thing is to use a medium they feel comfortable with, in this case it's quite obviously the online world: a website. This website will be an eye-opening and educational tool for anyone from teenagers to adults, to show the possible negative effects of social media. However, to grasp their interest and attention it needs to be something interactive. We can achieve this with an interactive story where the user chooses the journey they want to go and experience the possible "consequences" along the way, let's call this an interactive game. The story needs to be relatable to the younger generation, and will be about a fictional, famous influencer called Anna. The player follows a day in Anna's life where they have the control of the choices and activities she makes. Each part of the story offers the user two choices, either to "gain influence" or to "not gain influence", and a slider which lets them express how much they agree with the choice they made. But how can this become more interactive? In what way will this help the user? How can we evoke emotions in the user?

Why play an interactive story?

Stories are something we all grow up with, they captivate us and let us use our imagination in every way possible. One thing that stories especially do is let us be the character we read

about, we step into their shoes and live vicariously through them. For this reason, stories are used as a powerful tool in books, movies, and games to provide an experience to the user, it gives them enjoyment or even a sense of fulfillment on certain platforms. In this particular work it's especially important to make the user feel empathy for the fictional character in the story they are playing, in order to understand the potential consequences of the choices they make. Making a story with multiple endings gives the user a broader variety of choice since life is never just black or white. If there was only one story with perhaps two endings, the user would most likely feel unable to relate to the character, as the choices might not have been what they actually would do in real life.

Emotion and empathy through pictures, color, and music.

To reach an emotional level with the user and give a sense of meaning and relatability to the main character, the game will have pictures, color, and music to accompany the story. The pictures will accompany the text of the story to make it easier to follow since having only text can be difficult and become uninteresting in the long run. "A picture is worth a thousand words" is a saying almost everyone has heard at some point, and is quite self explanatory. We can also relate to and remember content from images far better than we can from reading a text since media and images attracts our attention, and promotes us to be more engaging with content. Anna Hasper summed it up well in her post on National Geographic Learning

¹"[...]using visuals is important as 60% of our brain is involved in one way or another . Using images with other modes of input will make learning more memorable[...]"

Pictures, however, are not the only way of grabbing the attention and keeping the interest of the user, colors and color-theory will help enhance emotions. For example, if the story is going in a more stressful or sad direction the colors will be more cold and unsaturated, if the story goes in a more happy direction the colors will be warmer and more saturated. Colors have a big significance with humans, certain colors are associated with certain things depending on where we live, our culture, and many other factors. For example, red is very associated with "danger", it's a color which can warn us about certain things, such as traffic lights or road signals: "red means stop", while pink is a color associated with girls and femininity, and blue is for boys.

Colors also make us feel emotion depending on the setting: sad, happy, nostalgic, warm, which is why in this project this will be a big factor with the choices the user makes during the story. Blue for instance is often associated with sadness but it is also a soothing color,, while red is associated with anger but also with love.^{2,4} This is something that many of the big animation studios such as Pixar use, which was especially clear in the movie "Inside Out" where each emotion has a color. Applying this to the project, we can hint to the user whether the main character, Anna, is feeling happy or sad with the decisions the user makes. I believe one quote from the famous painter Wassily Kandinsky fits this project well:

³"Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings[...]"

Color and music go hand in hand and for this reason we will also implement music to the interactive story.

Just like certain colors are associated with emotions, so too are instruments. For example, music with a slower tempo can make us feel more sad, while music with a higher up-beat

sound can make us feel more happy or excited.⁵ Using these three ingredients will help us get in touch with the emotions of the user, and ensure that the experience they have from playing this interactive game is one that lasts, and hopefully can help them see how they might be spending too much time behind a screen, or perhaps feel bad in some other way.

How do we help?

Playing through the story and making decisions for Anna will result in a statistic where we can see if the user is perhaps very desperate for recognition, fame, making money etc., no matter the cost. If this is the outcome, we will provide them with this statistics, and forward them to certain self-help options such as challenges to spend less time on social media, websites to help with anything from feeling insignificant, to perhaps showing tendencies of eating disorders, depression, or even suicidal thoughts. The story is supposed to be an eye-opener on the possible negative effects of social media, and how it affects our decision making and everyday life, and especially to show younger people that they are not alone, that they are enough just the way they are.

The need for action

These past few months the World Health Organization has released a lot of new studies based on how social media affects teenagers and young adults. We go to look back at something really basic such as daily routine, sleeping habits, exercising, interpersonal skills, managing emotions are crucial when it comes to talk about the development of adolescent well being.⁶ The organization has mention that teenagers have develop emotional, behavioral and eating disorders that lead to the worst case scenarios psychosis ir even suicide.

Research shows that 4.4% of 10–14-year-olds and 5.5% of 15–19-year-olds experience anxiety disorders. Additionally, depression affects 1.4% of adolescents aged 10–14 and 3.5% of those aged 15–19.⁷ The eating disorders are more likely to occur during early adolescence, and the complications associated with these disorders can lead to severe health issues, including premature death. In fact, eating disorders have one of the highest mortality rates among mental health disorders.

The need to raise awareness now is part of a crucial action to execute between organizations and educational institutions in charge of the early detection and treatment of the disorders. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been part of a strategy whose primary goal is to protect children's rights and ensure their well-being worldwide, bringing the tools to be able to communicate their concerns about themselves and overall, understand the side effects of social media.⁸ The project needs to take care of the problems that young teens are facing today and may not be able to realize the permanent damages that the use of social media could cause to their lives.

Research and artificial intelligence.

Asking ChatGPT (artificial intelligence) for advice, we received some good ideas. For the game itself, AI recommended “dialogue options”, *to expand choice options to include dialogue responses that can influence relationships with other characters*. We incorporated this idea to the story by adding a friend of Annas, where choices the user makes may affect the friend positively or negatively, which in turn may affect the emotional response of the user.

Another recommendation was “feedback and reflection”, to *after key decisions, provide brief feedback or reflection prompts that encourage players to think about the impact of their choices on their well-being*. We added this to the story to show the user if a choice had an impact on Anna's mental well being, adding empathy and remorse to strengthen the connection between the character and the user. ChatGPT gave us many good ideas, some of them were to add activities other than the game to the website, such as quizzes to help the user assess their social media habits and emotional well-being, provide challenges such as reducing screen time by beginning a new hobby, read a book, go for a walk every day, etc., and also have a section of the website with self-help articles, guides, and tips.

Conclusion

In order to help those who suffer one way or another from the effects of social media, we first need to understand them. The research we did for this project was exactly for this purpose. While we can't stop the constant presence of social media in our lives, we can try to help those who get lost along the way. Providing a safe place for young people where they can anonymously explore the potential negative effects of social media and, without having to ask anyone or feel ashamed, find ways to help themselves, is something very important today. In conclusion, with the use of a story with multiple choices full of rewards and consequences, driven by images, color, and music, we will guide the younger people towards a life where they feel less insecure, have better self-esteem, and stop comparing themselves to everything they see online.

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