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<div align="center">Social Media Pandemic</div>

In all human history, there has not been a single thing that has changed our society as we know it faster than the internet, and by extent, social media. Think of the world not 10 years ago, in 2012. Not 6 years after Twitter was founded, it was already a major player in social media. Facebook just went public. While these sites were already big back then, they were still growing. Ten years before that, in 2002, none of these sites even existed. One could say it was a more peaceful time. Yet in less than twenty years, social media has become an integral part of many of our lives. Even for those where it could play one of the most important roles: children and teens. Those born in the early 2000s and 1990s have grown up with the internet and seen at least in part the meteoric rise of these social media companies. A troubling trend has emerged. The percent of teens self-reporting moderate to severe emotional distress has almost doubled from 2013-2017, trending with the wild number of 70% of teens using social media multiple times a day, as the Canadian Medical Journal published in 2020 (Abi-Jaoude et al.). But to what extent is social media connected to this decline of mental health in youth? And what role have the creators and owners of these social media sites played in exacerbating or mitigating the possible effects? In this essay, I will analyze the role that corporations have played in this decline in mental health in order to make the case that social media companies are complicit with their creations. Social media is harmful to the extent that it manipulates users into detrimental behavioral patterns through the corporation's motivation for profit, the user design patterns, and its detachment from

reality.

Firstly, corporations have created and maintain these websites for profit, which is at a cross with the interest of human health. Examining a study by Rebecca Rast centering around the effects of social media addiction on young adults, the effect of certain design choices are apparent. One of the participants noted how "many times throughout the day I found myself clicking on my social media folder, it was like I've become programmed to just open Twitter when I get bored" (Rast et al.). Many users of social media seek the gratification it gives them, a gamification of a core human experience. Another participant in the study noted how it was "the comparison game." When people think of an addiction, sometimes blame is put onto the victim of addiction instead of those who had taken advantage of a vulnerable individual. With social media addiction, the symptoms are the same. Individuals are dragged out of their lives into a fake life online that can increase depression, anxiety, and decrease attention span. Yet in today's world, social media is used by nearly every young adult and adolescent. Its use is even high in older generations. One could wager that it is more prevalent than the use of alcohol; except there are restrictions on the age that alcohol is legal to use. Since their inception, social media has been designed to be a money maker. Investors saw money in social media through advertisements and engagement. Therefore, there is a motivation behind companies like Facebook and Twitter to earn as much money for their stockholders as they can, similarly to other corporations. This motivation leads to an axiom of the way these corporations operate their business. The business model is to keep engagement high, in order to keep their sales of advertisements attractive. Especially with children, this model can be hard to recognize. A study on how advertising affected children's propensity to obesity found that children were more susceptible to advertisements because they had not properly developed the mental facilities to determine what an advertisement does to them

(Coates et al.). To a corporation, this makes children the perfect demographic to advertise to.

Similarly, to increase engagement on social media, corporations design social media in a way that

encourages unhealthy use in order to drive their usage statistics up.

In addition, the design patterns that drive the development of social media play a role in its

effect on people. One study focuses on the spread of a self-harm game known as "The Blue

Whale Challenge," and its spread through social media. Posts from Twitter and Tumblr that made

up 75% of the study's dataset. And while it found that only about a quarter of these posts were

advocating for the challenge, it was able to spread to many different countries and fill the public

sphere in a "relatively short time span" (Sumner et al.). When such a challenge is able to spread

without hinderance by the operators of the website, it calls into question the motivations behind

moderation of these platforms. One could attribute it to how big the sites have become; however,

there is no excuse for not putting measures in place to curb the spread of viral challenges that can

endanger children. However, in their development process, this is not a priority. Enforcing

content moderation or ensuring a safe space does not further the financial interests of the

company, therefore it is usually seen as an afterthought instead of a core piece of the software.

Another study on social media's effect on children's mental health is concerned with how

"individual communication patterns are 'mediated' by the technological context in which they

occur," and that the sites can "impact, or even transform, adolescents' social experiences and

developmental processes" (Choukas-Bradley et al.). When a platform is able to transform the way

youth communicates, it follows that it has a responsibility to ensure an environment that enhances

and nurtures qualities that we desire, and not an environment of neglect that lets challenges like

the Blue Whale Challenge spread. The design choices that social media websites make are not

aligned with this philosophy, which directly leads to the spread of negativity and this type of

manipulation of the algorithms that the sites run on.

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