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9-5-2018

# Social Media and Consumer Culture: Addicted to the Idealized Consumer

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### Recommended Citation

Laeder, James, "Social Media and Consumer Culture: Addicted to the Idealized Consumer" (2018). *Advanced Writing: Pop Culture Intersections*. 30.

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## Pop Culture Intersection

Social Media and Consumer Culture: Addicted to the Idealized Consumer

By James Laeder, Santa Clara University

September 5, 2018

## Introduction

In recent years, the rise of new information and communication technologies have considerably transformed society, particularly the ways in which we communicate with others. Social networking sites (SNS), at the forefront of this paradigm shift in communication technologies, have become woven into the fabric of society. The convenience, immediacy, and reward system afforded by SNS raise users' satisfaction, paving the way for an increase in time spent on these sites (Choi and Lim, 2016, Yang et al., 2016). SNS have become both, the most advantageous, and pervasive form of media in modern America, excessive use of these platforms can result in addictive behaviors, otherwise referred to as SNS addiction (Salehan & Negahban, 2013). Although researchers have difficulty arriving at a consensus for identifying the meaning of SNS addiction, the characteristics parallel discussions around addiction, and all studies arrive at the same conclusion—SNS addiction has harmful consequences.

## **Background, Thesis, and Analysis**

To date, only a few theoretical research studies have investigated factors associated with SNS addiction, including belongingness (Gao et al., 2017), social capital (Yang et al., 2016), and enjoyment (Turel & Serenko, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to further examine the determinants associated with SNS addiction.

Thanks to these findings, we possess a greater understanding of how an individuals' behavior is shaped by a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, studies have primarily focused on the positive outcomes generated by a sense of belonging, with little considering the possible negative consequences. Certainly, when users have a greater sense of belonging, they are more likely to frequent SNS, which increases the likelihood of becoming addicted. Therefore, this article aims

to further the conversation by exploring the elements of SNS addiction using consumer culture as a lens for interpretation. To bridge this gap in research and build upon the current studies of SNS addiction, this paper focuses on the concept of consumerism to explore the aspects associated with users' SNS addiction. In particular, I will argue that consumer culture is the driving force behind SNS addiction.

Belongingness theory is viewed as a fundamental aspect in understanding the function of interpersonal relationships. The theory suggests that individuals seek interpersonal relationships in an attempt to fulfill a strong emotional need for a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Additionally, achieving a desired sense of belonging potentially leads to positive emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For the purpose of this article, a sense of belonging to SNS is defined as an involvement and perception of belonging in a SNS community including participation and communication with other users (Chai & Kim, 2012). It explains users' loyalty to or association with SNS and offers insight into the emotional aspect of users.

Studies have shed light on the important role a sense of belonging has in the SNS community. Research suggests a strong relationship between a sense of belonging and information sharing, knowledge contribution, and continued use by SNS users.

Social presence is a significant concept when discussing online communities because it explores how users' present themselves socially and affectively. Social presence plays an important role in explaining the emotions and behaviors of SNS users. Research suggests that users' enjoyment and continued use of SNS is affected by social presence. Most importantly, social presence amplified a user's confidence in a company and usefulness of information presented (Lin, 2008). However, the 'realness' of the communication created by SNS can easily lead to adverse effects. The likes, videos, comments, and views create a higher perceived level of

social presence, and in turn, may result in greater levels of engagement in SNS and higher levels of addiction.

Enjoyment is produced from the appreciation granted by an experience. In other words, enjoyment stems from the fun, attention, and sharing aspects of SNS. It reflects users' reflexive cost-benefit analysis that determines whether or not an act will be performed and how often to partake in an act on SNS. Enjoyment can be broken down into three parts: pleasure, arousal, and escapism (Gao et al., 2017). Pleasure is derived from positive emotions, such as satisfaction and happiness while performing an act. Arousal is associated with external stimulation like when an individual gets and alert or feels active. Escapism is a close relative to distraction and comes from participating in activities that consume one's limited cognitive resources in an attempt to escape from negative or unpleasant realities.

Enjoyment has a tremendous impact on behavior. Take for example online shopping. Many studies reveal that online shopping enjoyment strongly impacts an individual's engagement, resulting in more browsing and greater time spent online shopping. Another study by Choi (2016) found that users' continued use of smartphone based SNS is increased by enjoyment. Enjoyment not only contributed to users' intended continuance and engagement, but also contributed to the development of potentially bad habits, including addiction (Turel and Serenko, 2012). While the possible adverse effects of enjoyment have been studied, the effects of certain distinct aspects of enjoyment on SNS addiction have received little attention. Thus, this article explores how the different aspects of enjoyment, namely consumer culture, influence SNS addiction.

Thanks to SNS the world is connected like never before. The ability to connect with like-minded individuals, not bound by time and space, has had a tremendous impact on society. SNS

have facilitated the rise of social movements, such as #MeToo, #TakeAKnee, and the Arab Spring. It is not my intention to detract from the possible good SNS offer. However, there is such a thing as too much of a something good.

Most modern definitions recognize that addiction is harmful. A behavior is considered addictive when the immediate rewards are ultimately offset by harmful consequences. Breathing and blinking aren't considered addictive behaviors because, even if they are difficult to resist, they aren't harmful. Addiction is a strong attachment that is damaging and difficult to resist. SNS addiction is a behavioral addiction, different from injecting, smoking, drinking, or ingesting substances. They develop when an individual finds it challenging to resist a behavior, which, aside from satisfying an interim psychological need, results in long-term harm.

Obsession and compulsion are often times associated with addiction. Obsessions are constant thoughts a person has, and compulsive behaviors are acts a person can't stop doing. It is important to note the key differences between obsessions, compulsions, and addictions. Obsessions and compulsions are unpleasant when they are not being perused. This is known as negative reinforcement, meaning they provide relief. Conversely, addictions are positively reinforced and provide an immediate reward.

SNS are hard to resist because, for better or for worse, it has become part of the fabric of society. In fact, a 2018 study by the Pew Research Center revealed that 88% of 18 to 29 year olds and 78% among those ages 30 to 49 use some form of social media. 74% of Facebook users say they visit daily and just over half (51%) saying they visit several times a day. 60% of Instagram users frequent the site daily. Most notably, 40% of social media users indicated it would be difficult for them to give up social media. No one can deny its significance and impact on everyday life.

SNS has disrupted almost every single industry, from the way we shop, search for jobs, talk to loved ones, and everything in between. This symbiotic relationship between society, mobile devices, and SNS seems to strengthen more with every passing day, especially considering the advancements in mobile technology. New digital devices are engineered to be efficient, irresistible, and highly addictive. Hundreds of millions of people are able to instantly share their lives through Instagram posts, and just as quickly those people are evaluated in the form of likes, views, and comments. This behavior is fueled by the enjoyment of convenience, speed, and consumer culture. As SNS increasingly affect behavior and culture around us, relationships and communication are increasingly assessed by way of tweets, likes, and status updates. A like on Instagram, or a tweet shared a million times adds utility to the benefit side of users' subconscious cost-benefit calculations, justifying more use.

Attention is becoming a very valuable form of currency as SNS compete for our limited cognitive resources. Clicks and views have become the new gold standard. This is why social media companies have thousands of employees whose job focuses on persuading users to engage more and for longer periods of time. As a person logs into an SNS, such as Facebook and Instagram, specifically designed AI tries to present the perfect thing to gain that person's attention.

Most SNS offer their service for "free," meaning the company reply's on an advertising business model that forces the focus on maximizing attention. User attention becomes the product. The fact of the matter is, SNS are deliberately designed to be addictive. A prime example is Snapchat, which is the number one way younger Americans communicate. In fact, 78% of 18 to 24 year olds use Snapchat, and a majority of these users visit on a daily basis (cite). It displays the number of days in a row that a user messages another user. However, if a message

isn't sent back in forth within a 24-hour period, that streak goes away. This Snapchat streak is a deliberate manipulative and persuasive technique by the company. Teenagers are known to have upwards of 360 day streaks with many different people. It has become a status symbol used for bragging rights. This is so addictive that some users will ask parents and siblings to sign on and keep the streak alive when they are unable to connect themselves. It has become that significant to much of the youth.

Reward systems like the Snapchat streak, are designed by SNS companies, all with the same goal in mind—maximize addictiveness. Similar to a slot machines in Vegas, designers link a user's action with a reward. Pull a slot machine lever and watch the symbols spin in the hopes of receiving an enticing reward. Today, several billion people with smartphones have a slot machine within arm's reach at all times. Constantly looking at a phone is like playing a slot machine to check for new notification. Other similar actions include, the swipe and scroll Instagram feed, monitoring views or likes, and even building up connections on LinkedIn. SNS sprinkle intermittent rewards with almost every single design feature.

While the scroll design of an Instagram feed eventually lands on something that produces a dopamine reward, it fails to address the reason people post in the first place—consumer culture. I argue that users' post on SNS typifies the increasingly obsessive consumer culture of American society, especially Instagram. The photo-centric platform streamlines the process of creating a self-brand, as Instagram incorporates the "like" system that allows for more targeted advertising and potential leveraging of one's profile.

Instagram influencers who build a strong follower base are then able to partner with companies who in turn target the individuals that the influencer appeal to. Growing a following is turning into a very lucrative business. A few hundred thousand followers, when leveraged



effectively, can earn several thousand dollars for a single promotional post. Users are getting paid to promote items such as clothing, swimwear, supplements, restaurants, food, and travel. For the right price, just about anything can be promoted on Instagram.

The potential to commodify ones' profile provides a motivation that can lead to a SNS addiction. The allure of rags to riches is very real, considering some of the most famous people were discovered on SNS. Household names such as Justin Bieber, Kate Upton, and the Walmart yodeler, 12-year old Mason Ramsey. The right post, at the right time, viewed by the right people can lead to very big things. However, fame, or the quest for it, can have very negative consequences. The road to recognition can be a very dark path. Some photos, tags, comments, and hashtags attract more attention than others. Users chase the next big hit of likes by posting one photo or video after another, fueling addiction. This can be a very time consuming task, but as the saying goes, "work hard, play hard," and who doesn't like to play.

Consumer culture relies on blurring the distinction between wants, needs, and must haves. Digital addiction is merely an extension of this deep seeded societal norm. Keshishian (2013) provides insight into the relationship between SNS and capitalism, countering Marchall McLuhan's well-known saying, by saying "the medium is the message." She argues "It is the message—in this case hyper-capitalism—that shapes the medium and governs the context in which media are introduced and operate." In other words, the demanding and stressful nature of consumer culture make communication technologies, such as mobile phones and SNS, an essential part of life.

Consumption is woven into the social construct of most of the world which helps explain the motivation to work. In contemporary society, success of an individual is often times measured using a materialistic lens and relative to ones' ability to purchase. Consumption is

associated with happiness, a successful like, and even health. What better way to promote a happy, successful, and healthy life than post on SNS?

However, there is no ceiling for satisfying the need to consume, or at least showcase ones' ability to do so. This explains the urge felt by SNS users to post pictures and videos that showcase aspects about their lives. However, the line is constantly being driven further and further simultaneously with the movement of purchasers, but always a few steps ahead. It seems that human wishes have no limit. SNS provide the perfect environment to reinforce this idea by creating constant social comparison. In particular, Instagram has become one of the more commercialized SNS. Users are continuously exposed to fashion, food, fitness, and travel trends. In turn, I believe a majority of users' posts on Instagram are to express an ability to keep up with current cultural trends. This explains the overwhelming amount of posts showing limited release clothing, fitness routines, trendy restaurants, and view out an airplane window. Showing off the ability to spend money on SNS produces a very similar feeling to the confidence a new outfit brings.

Moreover, the ability to edit a post on SNS allows a user to manipulate images and videos. As a result, users can create a more deliberate self-brand presented to others. A profile of the idealized self. This strive for perfection is very time consuming and contributes to SNS addiction.

Alongside presenting a deliberately edited display of the idealized consumer, there is the recent rise in showing an ability to make an informed decision. Today's technology allows consumers great control over the information they see and how they see it. Consequently, access to the expertise and reviews of others is abundant and convenient, increasing the knowledge necessary for more well-informed social consumers.

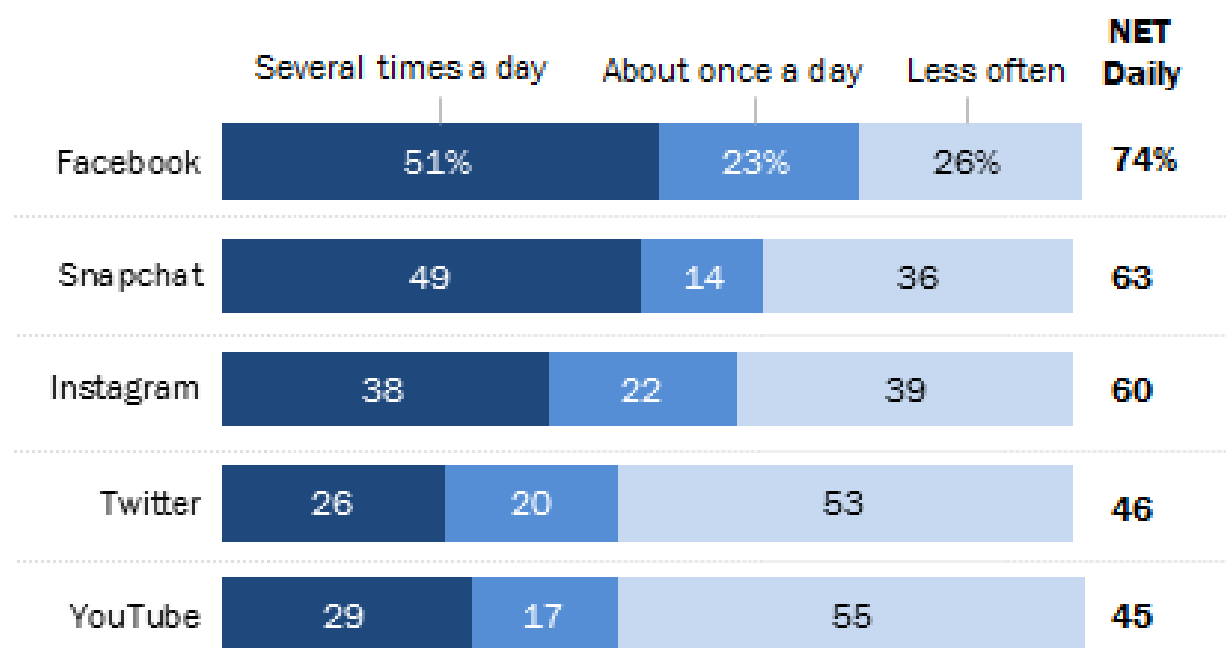
The emergence of social consumerism is largely due to social collaboration. In the past few years, Silicon Valley has produced an impressive number of tech company unicorns whose success is based around this very idea. Take for instance, Yelp, whose valuation is around \$2.8 billion. Yelp built and continues to build its content thanks to a collaborative community based effort. One could make the argument that aspects of SNS are present for users who are heavy contributors. While that may be true with a select few “yelpers,” I imagine that not being the case for 99% of users. The addictive quality stems from the benefits gained within the Yelp community. I argue that most college aged individuals consult the consensus of the Yelp community when deciding where to eat, shop, go out on Friday night, repair a cracked iPhone scree, fix a flat tire, and everything in between. And still, at the very foundation in which Yelp built its success upon, along with one’s motivation to use yelp—spending the almighty dollar.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is strong evidence suggesting that social networking sites are deliberately designed to be addictive, by normalizing an obsessive consumer culture. For better or for worse, social media has become a part of everyday life. Subsequently, signs of SNS addiction are increasing at a staggering rate. Whether the goal of using SNS is to build an image and identity is to grow interactions, attention, influence, and any combination of the three, there is a common thread—the amalgamation of social interactions and technology created by SNS for the co-creation of value. By looking beyond the surface, one is able to understand the true nature of SNS addiction—that it perfectly aligns with the goals of consumerism.

## A majority of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram users visit these platforms on a daily basis

Among U.S. adults who say they use \_\_\_\_, the % who use each site ...



Note: Respondents who did not give answer are not shown. "Less often" category includes users who visit these sites a few times a week, every few weeks or less often.

Source: Survey conducted Jan. 3-10, 2018.

"Social Media Use in 2018"

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