ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL DILEMMA

After Netflix's 2020 release of the documentary-drama *The Social Dilemma*, various

reactions emerged. In hindsight, these polar reactions are quite unsurprising given the dynamic,

unprecedented and arguably controversial nature of the film's subject matter: how technology

impacts, alters, and controls our behaviors and relationships, both on an individual and societal

level. For better or for worse, we now live in a world that is, in many ways, ruled by the digital.

Our physical reality exists alongside an increasingly omnipresent digital one and *The Social*

Dilemma aims to tackle exactly what this marriage between the authentic and the artificial

means for a functioning society. What led us to where we are now and how will it impact us

moving forward? These questions are at the heart of the documentary and illustrate the

ever-growing sense of unease among many as it relates to the rise of technological dominance in

our everyday lives.

While many considered the film to be an eye-opening and exceedingly necessary

exploration into the dangerous implications of technology on our society as whole (and, more

specifically, Gen Z) others considered the film to be misguided and over-dramatic and argued

that the film focused on the wrong things and amplified the wrong voices. That said, regardless

of individual consensus on the film's execution and whether or not certain aspects were handled

properly, there is no denial of the simple truth at the heart of the film: technology and, more

specifically, social media have completely altered the way we interact with both other people as

well as our environment and, left unchallenged, our current technological atmosphere runs the

risk of undermining both freedom and democracy, all across the globe.

The intersection of individual identity and social media was not so much directly

addressed within the film, so much as subtly implied throughout the film's discussion on the

impact of social media on today's youth. As individuals begin to use social media at younger and younger ages, the lines between online and offline identity begin to blur rapidly and no clearer is this obfuscation of identity than in the first generation of kids to gain access to social media as early as middle school: Generation Z (defined in the film as those born after 1996). The film argues that as the dominance of social media in our daily lives increases, so does the influence social media has on kids' sense of self-worth and identity. This is to say that individual (as well as, arguably, collective) identity has become inextricably linked to social media and the implications of this marriage between identity and social media are yet to come entirely to fruition, however, we can now see them bear increasingly negative results, evidenced in part by our current mental health crisis among adolescents and young adults. As Marwick discussed in his paper on online identity, the experience and presentation of identity is largely influenced by factors such as context and audience. One's environment and peers greatly influence how and why someone acts the way they do in any given situation. The type of context and the breadth of audience introduced by social media is completely unprecedented from anything else in human history and the film goes to great lengths to illustrate this inordinately and exponentially expansive social playing field and how it impacts our society and, most directly, our youth. The film highlights this direct impact through statistics on Gen Z and their unsettling rise of mental illness which appears to be directly correlated with the emergence of social media on mobile devices in 2009. To call these statistics troubling is quite the understatement. Of all the issues presented within the film, perhaps the most immediately pressing and concerning is the exponential rise in self-harm and suicide rates among teen girls. In the words of Jonathan Haidt, "a whole generation is more anxious, more fragile, more depressed."

While the film did a great job in conveying the statistical reality of what social media is doing to Gen Z, there is an argument to be made on whether or not the film fully fleshed out the impact social media has on adolescent girls. While the pressure to present oneself a certain way online certainly affects individuals across lines of gender, age, and so on, no group appears to be more negatively impacted by this pressure to appear "perfect" online than adolescent girls and I think that the concept of the male gaze and its infiltration into social media (and subsequent impact) was a necessary component entirely missed out on in the film. Film critic Lindsay Ellis sums up the concept of the male gaze nicely in her video titled "The Male Gaze vs. The Men: Feminist Theory Part 2", and defines the concept as follows: "the way in which male cinematographers photographed women and narratively crafted in which women on film are objects for male fetishistic gazing." No clearer is the presence of the male gaze within social media than on Instagram, a social media platform in which the fastest avenue to achieve in-app "success" (measured in likes and comments) is to be an attractive female. In a digital atmosphere in which there is always going to be someone who has more likes or comments than you, it's almost inevitable that the group most subject to social comparison and self-esteem issues would take the brunt of this new social reality and I think the film would have benefited greatly from exploring this new and increasingly toxic influence on adolescence.

As Matt Ratto explains in his paper on critical making, the intersection between social life and technology is largely misunderstood by the general public. Whether this misunderstanding is the result of technological ignorance or radicalized stances on the implications of technology, the concept of critical making remains important nonetheless. In theory, critical making concerns the integration of two vastly different modes of communication

and, as depicted in *The Social Dilemma*, this integration has hit some roadblocks. There has been an undeniable shift in the way we consume content and the way that content is presented to us. I personally believe the film did an excellent job in articulating exactly what changed within technology to get us to where we are today. The crux of this shift may best be described as a movement away from the original tool-based technology environment to a technology environment based entirely in user addiction and manipulation. The film conveys this message through a myriad of ex-Silicon Valley employees, each tasked to tackle the question of how technology and social media now function and influence society given this new business model. Their answer? Social media now functions within society as a new type of drug; a social drug, if you will. A drug that feeds on our innate human need to connect and interact with others. A drug that directly affects the release of dopamine in the brain. Most importantly, the film argues, this drug is being pushed onto us through tech-giants who view our information and attention as mere commodities. Rather than functioning as a tool (as originally intended), our smart-devices are running on a business model built to entice and engulf us. In other words, our attention is currency and in exchange for this attention, we are given a "digital pacifier" in which we have the ability to gain social capital (through user profiles and the ability to like and comment on other content), promote ourselves, and idealize our own reality as well as others for short-term dopamine hits. The question of "at what cost?" lingers throughout the film. In the words of Edward Tufte, "only two organizations call their customers "users": illegal drugs & software."

Works Cited

Marwick, A. (2013). "Online Identity." In Hartley, J., Burgess, J. & Bruns, A. (eds), Companion to New Media Dynamics. Blackwell Companions to Cultural Studies. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 355-364.

Ellis, L. (Director). (2017, September 6). The Male Gaze vs. The Men: Feminist Theory Part 2 | The Whole Plate: Episode 6 [Video file]. Retrieved November, 2020, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNkTeHpHj_I

Matt Ratto (2011) Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life, The Information Society, 27:4, 252-260, DOI: 10.1080/01972243.2011.583819

Malhotra, P. (2020, September 18). The Social Dilemma Fails to Tackle the Real Issues in Tech. Retrieved November 15, 2020, from https://slate.com/technology/2020/09/social-dilemma-netflix-technology.html

Steinfield, Charles & Ellison, Nicole & Lampe, Cliff & Vitak, Jessica. (2012). Online Social Network Sites and the Concept of Social Capital.

VanMeter, R., Syrdal, H. A., Powell-Mantel, S., Grisaffe, D. B., & Nesson, E. T. (2018). Don't Just "Like" Me, Promote Me: How Attachment and Attitude Influence Brand Related Behaviors on Social Media. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 43*, 83-97. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2018.03.003