

The Hidden Effects of Social Media on Thoughts and Actions

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Abstract: Nowadays, social media is being widely used, which brings individuals the convenience of obtaining information, but at the same time, its disadvantages are also apparent. It can be said that the characteristics and functions of social media are a “double-edged sword”; it has a significant impact on individuals because it will subconsciously change people’s “identity” from active seekers of information to passive consumers. Therefore, this paper will focus on how social media decreases individuals’ willingness and initiative to receive information and how social media uses algorithms and big data to influence people’s perceptions and actions. For example, silently, social media algorithms create a filtering bubble so that individuals can only see posts that are similar to their viewpoints; and how social media platforms establish business profit models that change individual’s traditional consumption patterns and the functioning of related business markets. As social media continues infiltrating personal lives, the authors conclude that people will lose their online identity and become more passive.

Keywords: social media, individuals’ identities, passive

1. Introduction

Old media forms have steadily faded into obscurity, while new media forms are ubiquitous. There is no denying that the widespread use of new media has made it easier for people to obtain information and enhanced personal autonomy in terms of time, space, and cultural norms. According to the latest statistics for social media networks in 2022, Facebook is the world’s largest social media platform, with nearly 2.5 billion monthly users [1], and the number of users on other social media platforms should not be underestimated [2]. Social media platforms allow individuals to maintain connections with people anywhere in the world, and the benefits to society have been increasing. These changes for the better include people having more of a voice in political activities, increased freedom of speech, and increased public scrutiny of society’s corporate, regulatory, and religious aspects. However, it is undeniable that the characteristics and functions of social media are a “double-edged sword.” In recent years, the drawbacks of social media have become more apparent than ever, as the benefits that were first experienced have turned into the norm. As a result, this paper will discuss the impact of new media forms, namely, social media apps, on individuals and how these platforms have turned people from active seekers into passive consumers of information. Meanwhile, it focuses on how social media platforms use algorithms and big data to affect people’s perceptions and actions differently, how social media platforms have changed how individuals receive consumer products,

and how related commercial markets operate to adapt to new norms. By comparing old and new forms of media, people can see how society has changed due to the advancement of social media and how social media subconsciously influences individuals' mindsets, cultures, and the way different fields function.

2. Literature Review

The widespread use of social media has gradually become a popular topic of study among academic researchers. Several previous studies have focused on analyzing the impact of social media on society and individuals and the effects of its communication.

In their paper titled *"A Study on Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media on Society,"* Akram et al. [3] highlight that social media changes how young people interact with their parents, peers, and technology. They emphasize that the impact of social media extends to various areas, including health, business, education, society, and youth in general. Akram et al. [3] acknowledge that social media platforms can serve as a tool for seeking business opportunities, but they are also cautious about the risks involved, such as cyberbullying.

Evans et al. [4], in their article *"Social Media Marketing,"* state that writing and innovation are "the next trend" driven by social technologies. Evans et al. [4] illustrate how social media can be used for business marketing to ensure higher levels of customer engagement, as well as drawing on the lessons and information from the first generation of social media marketing efforts and applying them across the organization.

"Filter Bubbles and Selective Exposure: A Critical Review" by Dahlgren [5] examines how the new media landscape, including social media, can create filter bubbles where users are exposed only to information that confirms their existing beliefs. Dahlgren challenges the concept of filter bubbles by questioning the assumptions of filter bubble theory and exploring the limitations of algorithms in predicting individual preferences. He presents counterarguments and encourages a more nuanced and less pessimistic view of the filter bubble effect on social media.

According to Binderkrantz and Skorkjær [6] in their paper *"Interest Groups in the Media: Bias and Diversity Over Time,"* the media is essential to interest groups. As social media grows, it becomes more important to politics and fuels political conflict within online communities. Binderkrantz and Skorkjær [6] say that when this phenomenon is extended to multiple other issues in the global community, it can lead to more serious internal conflicts in areas that were never seen before.

In their article titled *"What Drives Consumers to Click on Social Media Ads?"* Mao and Zhang [7] examine the factors influencing consumer response to social media ads. They specifically focus on content, media consistency, and individual characteristics. The study reveals that these factors influence the effectiveness of social media display ads.

Bharadwaj et al. [8], in their article *"Persona Traits Identification based on Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) - A Text Classification Approach,"* illustrate the real-life use cases of personality analysis such as mental health screening tests, human resource management, and social media. Examples include mental health screening tests, screening during human resources interviews, interactions between personalities that recommend to writers what people like to read, and advice from friends.

In Gilbert's [9] article, *"Strengthening Your Social Media Marketing with Live Streaming Video,"* he highlights how social media has revolutionized marketing by providing effective and affordable ways for individuals and organizations to engage, convert, and transform consumers. Gilbert [9] emphasizes the role of live-streaming video in reducing costs, increasing customer engagement, and expanding reach. Additionally, Gilbert discusses live video platforms, strategies, survey results, and the impact of live video.

In the paper *“Getting Closer and Experiencing Together: Antecedents and Consequences of Psychological Distance in Social Media-Enhanced Real-Time Streaming Video,”* Lim et al. [10] discuss how social media can create psychological distance between users, affecting the quality of the shared experience. They studied real-time streaming video services and found that factors like inhabited space and isomorphic effects can reduce psychological distance, enhancing the shared experience.

3. The Passive Consumption of Information: Social Media’s Impact on Critical Thinking and Misinformation

In the past, people subscribed to newspapers or bought magazines to keep up with the ever-changing world due to the limitations of media and technology. This interaction often stimulated a primal desire for knowledge and encouraged individuals to think critically and actively about the world. For instance, some people would purchase several publications to compare and reflect on different viewpoints and reporting. However, the function of new social media platforms, to integrate, categorize, analyze, and widely spread information, has reduced people’s curiosity for information and progressively made them more passive than active. Moreover, individuals have grown accustomed to using Google and how social media pushes real-time news to stay informed. Thus, rather than using critical thinking skills, most people’s thoughts and perspectives on various issues derive from online information [3]. Meanwhile, unlike the content in newspapers and magazines that needed to be evaluated by publishers before publication, social media platforms can push news and information without being subject to fact-checking or any approval process. Coupled with the fact that artificial intelligence technology is now skyrocketing, there is plenty of content on platforms where much of the information is mass-produced by AI technology. Thus, the information undoubtedly needs more authenticity and accuracy than yesterday’s carefully produced newspaper articles. In this era of global communication, the quality of information received by the public is reduced, and the public is frequently bombarded with misinformation from different unreliable social media sources, which is a powerfully destructive force as it may spread quickly and mislead the public easily. For example, during the pandemic, false information was published online claiming that COVID-19 patients would get internal administration of disinfectants. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) then reported a dramatic increase in calls to poison control centers regarding exposure to household disinfectants. Additionally, a CDC survey of 502 adults in the United States revealed that 39% of respondents engaged in dangerous practices, including washing food products with bleach, applying household cleaners directly to the skin, and intentionally inhaling or ingesting disinfectants to avoid contracting COVID-19. It can be seen that many people have become accustomed to believing the information on social media and have lost the sense of reflecting on whether the information is accurate or not. Individuals are frequently “fed” information by social media platforms, the primary means of entertainment and communication. Individuals are always surrounded by social media, which has quietly penetrated all aspects of people’s lives. Consequently, people become less defensive and critical of the information on social media platforms, and fake news on social media can easily affect people’s consciousness, negatively impact their physical health and increase their psychological anxiety.

4. The Impact of “Filter Bubbles” Created by Social Media Algorithms: Narrow Perspectives and Societal Tensions

People’s online personas have become more passive due to social media algorithms limiting users to particular social circles. Social media companies and their in-depth analyses draw from data on a user’s browsing history, time of use, and many other metrics on different types of interactions to infer

their preferences. In order to keep users interested in staying on social media for as long as possible, social media platforms can be personalized for each user and usually only provide their customers with content that they are interested in [4], and make their content provide a dopamine effect to customers rather than irritate or frustrate them. This type of targeting can be great for individuals to isolate themselves from the busy external world and immerse themselves in the individualized space social media apps create for them. However, in the long run, it may also lead an individual to adopt a narrow view of the world. One report indicates that one of the most significant influences of this phenomenon is known as filter foam [5]. People tend to encounter online environments that reflect only their opinions, making it difficult to consider an alternative view. This phenomenon can enhance religious bias among people who are immersed in their own community of like-minded people. Many people in these groups firmly believe that only their beliefs are correct and are unwilling to consider the views of other religious groups. When this phenomenon extends to multiple other issues in global communities, it is likely to spark even more serious intra-group conflicts on several issues, with many recent disputes even in previously unheard-of areas [6]. For instance, the constant online conflict between Android and Apple mobile phone users, which often attracts insults and put-downs between the two groups on various new media platforms, with Android users convinced that Android is a better system than Apple and Apple users confident that Apple is a better system than Android. However, there may be no absolute better or worse between the two systems, but rather a “filter bubble” where people are exposed to environments that reflect only their point of view, closing their scope of understanding and making it difficult to consider other points of view. This exposure to limited perspectives only leads to more conflict as it becomes more challenging for individuals to engage in meaningful discussions on a wide range of topics. In addition, “filter bubbles” also provide “organizations” for some “anti-social” people with aggressive statements that are intentionally destabilizing online, who use social media platforms to gather together and intentionally post false information that is not conducive to social stability to intimidate the public. The “filter bubble” increases their impact on the Internet and the speed at which they spread negative messages on social media platforms. As a result, even though social media provides people with easier access to information and personal autonomy, it also hurts individuals and society to a certain extent. People are unaware of this and are confined to a “smaller” circle. At the same time, many less obvious societal tensions are intensified and become less inclusive in the “filter bubble,” which is not conducive to social stability.

5. Profit-Driven Content Personalization in Social Media: Consumers Turned into Profit-Making Tools for Capitalists

One of the main reasons social media apps only push content users like is to maximize the number of sales generated from the advertisements attached to that content [7]. Social media apps use algorithms to predict what goods users are likely to want and then push advertisements that tailor these goods to users so that they are likely to be more willing to watch the advertisements, increasing their purchasing power. Consequently, to attract users to spend money on their platforms to buy products, social media APPs must ensure that they constantly output content that interests users and push products to users they are likely to buy. For example, a social media APP may send advertisements for snacks or cooking supplies to a user who likes to watch food videos because a user who likes to watch food videos is likelier to buy these items than a user who likes to watch sports videos. Also, to more accurately recommend the goods they are likely to consume to people, social media platforms are good at capturing users’ curiosity to consume. Taking the recently popular MBTI 16 personality test as an example, when big data knows that users have searched about their personalities on social media platforms, big data recognizes the concerns of these users. Individuals with type “F” (stands for emotional) in MBTI are relatively sensitive, so the platform will show these people a series of

paid tests advertising related to “sensitivity” to persuade them to buy tests to determine their level of sensitivity. Alternatively, individuals with type “P” (stands for improvisational) on the MBTI like to be flexible and are prone to procrastination [8], and the platform pushes a series of paid advertisements about “procrastination self-tests” to entice them to spend money. No matter which form of spending on social media platforms, it is easy to see that the business purpose of social media platforms is to profit from understanding people’s preferences and privacy so that people will willingly spend money on the platforms. However, as big data is specialized in recommending goods to users, it may be difficult for users to find out that they are being “exploited” because the content that attracts people to spend money on social media APPs is usually in line with their needs. Thus, in this aspect, people’s identities are unknowingly transformed into consumers of the networked society and “profit tools” for the capitalists behind the media.

6. Live Business: Exploiting Consumer Behaviour and Seduction on Social Media Platforms

Last but not least, social media platforms push potential goods to users through algorithms and entice them to buy, which is the initial purpose of the social media business market. Although mobile short videos or image-text posts on social media have become an essential way for social media companies to achieve commerce profitability, it is undeniable that the cost of recording short videos is high and complicated to produce, while image-text posts are limited in their distribution and attraction. As a result, a more advanced and efficient way to profit from social media has been born - selling goods to viewers through real-time streaming. Taking China’s real-time streaming sales (live e-commerce) market as an example, according to China’s Ministry of Commerce [11], China’s online retail sales in the first 11 months of 2023 amounted to 14 trillion RMB, an increase of 11% year-on-year, and in the first ten months of 2023, China’s live streaming sales amounted to over 2.2 trillion RMB. It can be seen that, as a new business model in the Internet era, live e-commerce is developing rapidly, and this business model has an important role to play in promoting the development of the economy in the context of the sluggish recovery of the global economy. Many businesses have shifted their primary market from offline stores to live sales, bringing convenience and new shopping experiences to consumers and changing people’s consumption habits, psychology, and modes. In live sales, the hosts always establish a close emotional connection with the audience and explain the goods carefully to create a comfortable purchasing atmosphere so that the audience will trust the host or the product and then produce the willingness to buy [9]. Many viewers become loyal fans of the hosts, who happily and willingly purchase items in the real-time streaming. Coupled with the fact that there are many types of goods to be sold by the host in the live stream, the sales time for every kind of goods is restricted, leaving limited time for consumers to react to a product and a shorter period to push people to make a purchase decision more quickly. In fact, live e-commerce is a set of stimulation of the consumption of the scene; in behavioral psychology, it corresponds to the “stimulation - body - reaction” model, that is, the host through the scene, words, and even rhythmic background music to stimulate consumers to produce a desire to purchase, and then make a buying response [10]. Many consumers seem to buy goods voluntarily and actively in the live stream. Still, they are unknowingly caught in the Internet consumption trap and make a lot of irrational and non-essential consumption. In recent years, live streaming has been increasingly associated with the concepts of “induced consumption,” “desire consumption,” and “crowd consumption,” so people are increasingly confronted with the elaborate sales tactics and temptations of social media. Thus, it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to take the initiative and be conscious of social media’s detailed sales tactics and temptations.

7. Conclusion

Social media, as a form of new media, plays an increasingly significant role in individuals' lives and may have a greater impact than people realize. Social media apps facilitate people's lives by providing ways to relax and learn about the world. However, its adverse effects are becoming increasingly apparent. The features and functions of social media have reduced people's willingness and initiative to explore other sources of information and news, and the mixed messages on social media platforms have reduced the quality of the information people receive. Meanwhile, social media algorithms create a filter bubble that maintains these users by filtering out the content they don't like and keeping only the content they want. In this way, individuals' views and identities are molded to match those of others they see in tweets more closely. This personalization makes it difficult for people to interact with ideas in online communities that differ from their views. Additionally, social media APPs use algorithms and big data to predict users' needs, build commercial profit models, and push them adverts for products they may need to make a profit. Finally, the new sales model of live e-commerce on social media platforms has changed individuals' traditional consumption patterns and habits while also using the characteristics of the Internet to create consumption traps for people, leading to a lot of unnecessary consumption without them consciously realizing it. Therefore, with the continuous penetration of social media into individuals' lives, people's identities on the Internet have lost critical consciousness and have become more passive.

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