

Social Anxiety in the Digital Age

Ruohan Chen^{1,a,*}, Chen Gao², Yixiao Xu³, Chengzhi Zou⁴ and Jiaxuan Chen⁵

¹*College of Letter and Science, University of California, Davis, Davis, 95616, US*

²*Shanghai High School International Division, Shanghai, 200231, China*

³*Saint Paul American High School, Beijing, 100019, China*

⁴*Emory College, Emory University, Atlanta, 30322, US*

⁵*Keystone Academy, Beijing, 101318, China*

a. rhhchen@ucdavis.due

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper focuses on the relationship between social media usage and social anxiety. The increasing number of global social media users has brought both convenience and consequences, including negative impacts on mental health. The paper elaborates on the possible causes of social anxiety through social media, including fear of negative evaluation, motivation to impress others, and the high status of others. It also highlights the inauthentic nature of social media and its contribution to social anxiety, including confusion, negative feedback, fear of missing out and waiting. The paper concludes that paying more attention to the formation of social anxiety through social media and its consequences is significant and necessary.

Keywords: social media, social anxiety, negative evaluation, fear of missing out, mental health

1. Introduction

The use of social media is one of the most widespread internet activities. Social media usage surpassed 4.26 billion users globally in 2021; by 2027, that number is predicted to reach almost six billion [1]. The development of social media creates opportunities for people to connect and present themselves with others in many ways. While bringing convenience to people, social media has also led to consequences, including negative impacts on mental health. This paper will mainly focus on social anxiety that is caused or relative to social media utilization.

On the one hand, the paper would elaborate possible causes for social anxiety through social media, comprising fear of negative evaluation, motivation to impress others, and high status of others. On the other hand, it is also necessary to illustrate typical features of social media and how they contribute to social anxiety. Specifically, social media is inauthentic, leading to confusion among people when they try to interact with others or find information online. Besides, social media also provides people with more possibilities to receive negative feedback since there are many chances to reach out to different social media platforms nowadays. People who spend excessive time on social media struggle to prevent unfavorable outcomes like fear of missing out. Moreover, waiting and being clueless about the response can also lead to social anxiety. The reason is that people would quickly feel nervous when they cannot receive expected responses, and they would also worry about how others perceive

them.

Social anxiety disorder might primarily affect people's lives because anxiety can prevent one from enjoying life, relationships, job, or education. Therefore, it is significant and necessary to pay more attention to how social anxiety forms through social media and the detailed consequences that would come with it.

2. Possible Causes for Social Anxiety through Social Media

Social media has become an essential part of our life. Billions of people can access uncountable information just by tapping on the screen. Some social media platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, also allow people to communicate and connect with their friends across the globe. However, as social media becomes more popular among all age groups, frequent social media use has also been linked to social anxiety. Social media could cause anxiety in at least three ways: fear of negative evaluation, motivation to impress others, and high status of others.

One possible cause of social anxiety on social media is the fear of negative evaluation. Social anxiety may arise when someone receives negative evaluations or possesses negative expectations about how others may react, such as disapproval, judgment, or scorn [2]. Things like new followers, "likes," and positive comments in social media can trigger the dopamine reward system in the brain. Feeling rewarded reinforces the behavior of repeatedly checking to see if there are new followers, likes, and comments. If someone receives negative evaluations, the lack of positive reinforcement could cause anxiety because changes in dopamine may increase the chances of feeling anxious. In the case of negative expectations of others, one could experience symptoms of social anxiety if they think that they don't "live up" to the ideals or expectations of others. Additionally, people could become worried about what others think of them in real life compared to what they portray in social media. Therefore, people can experience social anxiety while imagining negative evaluations on social media and when receiving them.

Before someone develops a fear of negative evaluations, they must have the motivation to impress others. As motivation to impress others increases, so does the likelihood of experiencing social anxiety [3]. People usually want to leave a good impression when they first meet someone, including on social media. Nowadays, people can check someone's social media page, like Facebook or Instagram, before meeting them in person. Therefore, the likelihood of impressing others on social media increases the chance of experiencing social anxiety. For example, if people rely on using filters on photos to alter their appearance too much, they may start to feel anxious about meeting in person. Therefore, the motivation to create a preferred impression on social media and the doubts that one will do so in real life could cause social anxiety.

The motivation to impress others is high only for those with valued traits, skills, or status. Someone influential, respected, or attractive can bring about valuable results. Their approval, respect, and assistance are highly valued, and their opinions are essential in confirming or denying a person's claimed strengths or weaknesses [3]. In the modern world, social media produces interactions between celebrities and their audiences on a vast scale, and this caused the emergence of contemporary fandom culture. Social media also creates a one-way bond between stars and their audiences, and audiences worldwide tend to connect emotionally with the people they meet on screen [4]. This could lead to social anxiety if people are so emotionally attached to the celebrity that they ignore real-life relationships that could validate them. In some rare cases, when a star does something problematic and gets criticized by the public or the internet, the fans would fear that others would blame them because they are the fanbase of that celebrity, which increases social anxiety.

3. Typical Features on Social Media That Contribute to Social Anxiety

3.1. Inauthenticity of Social Media

In the present world, social media takes over a large portion of human life. With several application platforms, people can get up-to-date news and information on important events, which helps one get a broader concept of the development of the world. Besides the benefits the internet brings, several problematic features of social media are also shown while using it. In the following paragraph, three possible social media components contribute to anxiety.

The first feature that comes to people's minds is authenticity. Commonly, people lie on the internet. Now, everyone can and has the right to post anything they want on the internet, such as their evaluation, comments, or perspectives, some of which are misleading. And there is no enforcement mechanism to prevent it, thus increasing the distrust among the people on the internet.

Grouping, from the evolutionary perspective, is significant to human beings. In the past, humankind, as well as some other species, preferred to work in groups because it provides one with more benefits. For instance, by working in a group that requires face-to-face communication [5], the survival rate would increase and improve the reproduction rate as the group members help each other. But on the internet, we interact with groups of strangers with a great degree of "visual anonymity." Without face-to-face communication online, it is hard to find commonness or truthfulness in a wide range of cyber worlds, thus increasing the sense of isolation for each internet user. In this case, it is easier to imagine why an increasing number of people feel anxious when they fail to control the anonymity of the internet; they contact every day.

Not only that, but it has also been shown that people prefer to cooperate with someone they trust and to engage in mutually beneficial interactions, and this is because those who they trust are uniquely valuable to them to some extent. Commonly called the bankers' paradox, the bank prefers to loan money to the rich who, in fact, don't really need the money since, the bankers believe, rich people are able to pay back the money while the poor are not [6]. Imagine that a woman gets injured in the wild, for example, how can she get help from others when she has this 'bad credit'? In some cases, helping others is building on an underlying rule that both sides could provide the same amount of benefit to each other. But how can the helpers ensure that the one in the wrong situation can repay them after they helped them? The solution is the unique value of a friend. In a real friendship, friends would help each other when they meet difficulties, even if they are at a bad "credit risk." And one of the root reasons is that your friend is uniquely valuable to you and vice versa. This is why friends would help you even if you are in bad shape.

But in social media, where people intake vast amounts of information and encounter strangers daily, how can one stand out and become uniquely valuable out of millions or billions of people in the world? And, since we can't perfectly trust what people say on social media, how could one form deep intimate values with another? Hence, people have a more challenging time developing deep relationships with each other on the Internet.

3.2. More Possibilities for People to Receive Negative Feedback in the Digital Age

Social media has affected how people communicate with other individuals around them and has increased over the past 20 years; It now encompasses a variety of software or applications that are deeply involved in people's daily life [7]. Those websites and applications come from different producers and are designed in various ways. Some may focus on chatting one-on-one or in groups, while others allow people to post pictures or discuss topics in public.

Social media can be utilized for a range of purposes, such as staying in touch with friends, integrating with individuals who share common interests or hobbies, discovering new information,

keeping up with celebrities, trying to find romantic partners, conveying one's thoughts and feelings, and sharing both positive and negative information [7]. On the other hand, communication is rarely performed in real-time or face-to-face during Internet and social media engagements. The following fundamental components are present in almost every social media platform: (1) The users of social media is a content producers and consumers, posting their information and responding to others through comments, sharing, or "liking;" (2) The profiles of users are essential for both creating and gaining access to information; (3) social media platforms let users create social networks by adding "friends" (for example, on Facebook) or "followers" like Twitter and Instagram [8].

Compared to our human ancestors, people on social media have a lot of ways to receive feedback, learn more information, or share their thoughts through different social media platforms instead of presenting only one voice face-to-face, and this also means there are more possibilities for people to feel nervous and anxious when they get negative feedback. Specifically, people who feel a sense of "fear of missing out" in online relationships, feel stressed out by maintaining connections with numerous individuals, and feel envious of other people's lifestyles may all contribute to social anxiety [9].

As social animals, our humans' natural need to fit in is significant to both physical and emotional health [10]. The discomfort we experience when it appears that others are engaging in positive events without us is known as "fear of missing out," or "FOMO." Although FOMO is not exclusive to social media, browsing social media sets us up for it. People may satisfy their desire to belong by utilizing social media. Still, they also risk developing anxiety when they feel like they don't belong and are missing out on valuable shared experiences [11].

Social media is also an excellent way to enhance relationships and make new friends. This reduces social isolation and loneliness and, in turn, indirectly improves mental health [12]. Nevertheless, when people fail to or feel exhausted from maintaining their relationships online, they can feel stressed and even anxious if they consider maintaining relationships online as a daily routine, gradually leading to more significant anxiety.

On social media, people frequently expose certain parts of themselves and create their ideal personalities; however, most people unconsciously compare themselves to others, regardless if other people are better or worse. In this way, social anxiety may rise due to upward and downward social comparisons. Specifically, some people rate themselves lower than others, making it easier to engage in negative self-evaluation and self-identity in social situations [13], meaning that worrying too much about what others think would cause more anxiety.

In short, we cannot deny that social media provides people with more ways for communicating and connecting with others, whereas people also gain more possibilities to feel anxious when receiving negative responses from social media.

3.3. Waiting and Unknowing Can Cause Social Anxiety

We can communicate on social media anytime and anywhere in this digital era. However, because social media interaction is asynchronous, users don't know when to expect a response or if they will get one.

Humans, indeed, are naturally social animals. In the current digital age, most people are addicted to social networking rather than real life. According to Datareportal [14], around 92.1 percent of the world's internet users use mobile phones to go online, and mobile phones account for approximately 55.7 percent of their online time. Moreover, based on internet expert Trevor Wheelwright's measurement, Americans check their phones 334 times per day on average, equivalent to once per 4 minutes. From all these significant figures, we can infer that people's lives revolve primarily around social media. People build their life on social media to make it seem attractive to other people and hope to influence the social media community. Some psychologists also showed people's

addictiveness to social media through experiments. For instance, Rasan Burhan and Jalal Moradzadeh's [15] paper '*Neurotransmitter Dopamine and its Role in the Development of Social Media Addiction*' reveals that social media has linked the human dopamine reward system with the feedback loop. Thus, this dependency on social media inevitably puts social media on top of the assessment of the quality of life. Being excluded from media interaction or communication with others seems to be one of the biggest threats to living for some. In other words, having an interactive social life is just as important as trying to survive under the pressure of natural selection. Small things, such as not receiving a text message response, will also be comparable to starting a fight, as people consider that a threat to their lives. Suppose one is constantly under the pressure of not getting responses back. In that case, they will probably avoid active social interaction with people online, furthering their exclusion from the group.

Moreover, being ignored online is not better than being hit by someone in the face. People tend to be doubtful and unconfident about themselves after not being seen in the media. Unlike face-to-face communication, when communicating online, people spend more time rethinking their phrasing, attitudes, or even emojis used during the interval time of waiting. Overall, the time we spend waiting for responses results in self-doubt and overthinking processes that will enhance overall anxiety.

On the most commonly used social media platforms, such as WeChat or Instagram, there's this 'moment posting' interface where people can post their daily photos and get likes or hearts from their friends or followers. However, this process leads to more anxiety as the likes will pop out at unpredictable times during various intervals. It's been referred to as the 'cycle of post and pause' by Alyss Bowen [16] in her article '*Instagram Anxiety: why we feel so nervous about Posting on social media.*' Indeed, most people stay or constantly return to online platforms to check whether they received any likes. Since receiving likes triggers our dopamine reward system [15], we tend to wait online for the 'likes' to occur rather than put our phones away. Furthermore, some even suggested that the notification sign is associated with our anxiety level. In the recent *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* study, Rosenboim concludes that participants who received notifications during work time experienced a higher level of impulsivity and stress.

We live in a world of likes, shares, and updates. However, it's always crucial for us to be conscious of the incomplete nature of comments and responses we receive online. Lastly, talking to others about your concerns is always ideal. You will realize it's a prevalent phenomenon among all. Remember that we are just getting used to this digital era; we are still adapting just as it works in evolution.

4. Conclusion

All in all, it can be illustrated from literary reviews that social anxiety species-typical adaptation is used to prevent social exclusion to some extent. This sense of feeling might be derived from inadequate social repertoire or skills, which suggests individuals often underestimate their social abilities and perceive themselves and comments received as more negative. This might further cause individuals to attempt to impress others using social media exposure, which might cause further stress as the desire increases, and unique comments or attention from individuals who obtained higher power might be paid extra attention.

Through the three features of digital media nowadays, we can know that the internet is inauthentic, provides people with more chances to receive negative feedback, and includes uncertainty due to waiting and unknowing the information. As mentioned before, information seen on the internet cannot be guaranteed 100% valid. People often interact with strangers, leading to distrust between individuals, and thus groups cannot be formed. This "visual anonymity" goes against the evolutionary significance of the concept of grouping, which suggests face-to-face group works to increase the reproduction rate as people help each other out. From the second aspect, Information on the internet can be sculpted and reshaped as other information systems cannot. This allows space for explanations

and interpretations and cultivates conflicts and different stances. Last but not the least, as the social comparison theory suggests, people will likely compare their abilities to others. Thus the comparison between individuals increases as digital media platforms allow individuals to meet more and more strangers, making it harder to stand out from the group. This is different from the groups of our ancestral world used to like, which had a smaller social circle with fewer opportunities for social comparison.

In summary, several features of social media are possible causes of social anxiety: inauthenticity, more possibilities for people to get negative feedback, and uncertainty due to waiting and being unaware of the information. These features make social media a very different social environment than our ancestors experienced, a relatively small group and a place where only face-to-face communication was present. As the factors mentioned above deviate from these characteristics more and more, we can expect more social anxiety as the product of the digital age.

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