

**Inquiry process document:**

Social media impact on users  
Overall Word count: 1452

**Section A: Inquiry Focus**

Section A Word Count: 299

**Inquiry Question**

*To what extent do the benefits of using social media outweigh the costs for users?*

**Commented [A1]:** Clear question identified, focused.

**Real-life examples**

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) discovered that symptoms of anxiety disorder rose to 25.5% and 24.3% for symptoms of depression in American adults in June 2020. (Czeisler, et al.) This correlates with social media use that has also risen in 2020, for example Twitter use jumped 34% in the second quarter of 2020. (Twitter)

**Commented [A2]:** Very effective at providing context about the issue in a concise manner. Good use of sources.

While these changes can be attributed to restricted movement during the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, the connection between rising rates of social media use and spikes in mental health problems cannot be ignored.

**Connections**

Connections with the following concepts:

Expression: Representing ideas, creativity, political ideas and personal beliefs in the social media space.

Identity: Defining oneself by the social group you belong to. Understanding how one is viewed by others.

Values and Ethics: This is the distinction between what is right and wrong shared through rules, policies and laws that guide online individual and group conduct. This applies to data collected that maps users' behaviour online that is subsequently used to target them with advertising. It also refers to methods used to grab attention and keep users using social media apps for as long as possible.

Contexts within which the ideas are connected:

Social: How we form relationships digitally. How we stay members of a group, how virtual relationships grow and take the place of real world relationships.

Health (Mental ) Accessibility of social groups when physical meeting is impossible, is a positive aspect of social media use. However, social media applications are designed to harness and keep attention that can lead to addiction and anxiety.

**Commented [A3]:** Very precise and focuses on a narrow and specific aspect of health. Context justified and clearly relevant to the topic—an innovative approach.

Content covered:

Data, algorithms, algorithms (machine learning) and media.

**Section B: Source Discussion and Evaluation**

Section B Word Count: 1057

At its best, social media can connect, affirm and help you develop or reinforce your identity and sense of who you are. At its worst, it can polarise, subjugate and isolate. Over time, the best intentions of social media applications like Facebook and Twitter have moved from their goals of connecting people in online communities to viewing them as 'users' and advertisers as customers. The word 'user' is commonly used to describe addicts. Many commentators describe the changes in features in apps such as Facebook and Instagram like infinite scrolling and 'like' buttons as addictive and designed to induce users to spend more time using the apps. This in turn extends the period to which the user continues to use the application and is exposed to advertising. This presentation will explore to what degree the benefits to users of social media outweigh the costs, if they do at all.

**Commented [A4]:** Solid introduction that helps provide some initial context and understanding.

Orlowski, J. *The Social Dilemma*. Exposure Labs, Argent Pictures, The Space Program. Netflix, 2020.

The main premise of this documentary is, "If you're not paying for the product, you are the product." We hear about the negative effects of social media such as increased rates of anxiety and depression. Those interviewed outline the tools of manipulation employed by social media companies that can lead to addiction. There is also the discussion of the spread of fake news. The producer of the documentary, Jeff Orlowski is better known for his films with environmental messages such as 'Chasing Ice'. He believes that we are facing the 'climate change of culture' through society's blind use of social media. The documentary's purpose is to raise awareness of issues like design ethics and the privacy of our data. It is hoped that this awareness will allow social media users to make more informed choices about how they use social media applications and understand the impact social media use may have on their mental health and relationships.

**Commented [A5]:** Key ideas learned from the sources are effectively and clearly summarized.

Tristan Harris provides the main thread throughout the documentary as the interviews with other experts unfold. As a technology ethicist, and a former employee of Google, he provides a well researched point of view on social media companies and their behaviour. You see interviews with people who have been employed by technology companies such as Google, Instagram and Twitter whose accounts corroborate those of Tristan Harris. They outline the features that the social media applications use to get the users' attention and keep it. For example, the infinite scroll feature and auto playing video. They explain that what started out as a positive way to develop online communities has turned the user and their data into the commodity.

The methods used in this documentary are very dramatic. Although specialist interviews with experienced and knowledgeable people whose answers align, lends credibility to the documentary, the dramatisation of a character who becomes radicalised through social media, that runs through it tends to take that credibility away. For example, it is an oversimplification to say social media is the only cause of harm. Many critics of the documentary point out that those who become radicalised do so after finding like-minded people on sites on the internet, not social media. For example, Brenton Tarrant, who was a prolific poster on 8 chan, a site frequented by those with extremist views before he went on to murder 51 people in New Zealand's worst mass killing. (Lovatt, I., & Wells, G.)

**Commented [A6]:** Evaluation of the source. While this is not expected in the inquiry process document, it shows more advanced understanding of the material.

He formed his social connections via a website and discussion forum, rather than through social media like Facebook or Twitter.

Critics say that economic inequality in the world continues to worsen with or without social media and many were already skeptical of the motives of those in power. On balance, the issues of political polarisation and the fast spread of fake news or misinformation was already a problem. Social media just provides better tools to speed up the trend.

Chandler, Simon. "Coronavirus Depression Spike Suggests Social Media Is No Substitute For Real Life". *Forbes*, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/simonchandler/2020/09/08/coronavirus-depression-spike-suggests-social-media-is-no-substitute-for-real-life/?sh=4e1d89961033>. Accessed 22 Dec 2020.

The author, Simon Chandler is a journalist who writes for Wired, The Verge and other technology focussed publications. He tackles topics as broad as social media and artificial intelligence. This is a short article, but packed with up-to-date statistics from organisations such as the Centre for Disease Control in the United States related to anxiety and depression. He notes that although social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter help us to socialise, they do not provide meaningful connection with others. He also quotes research that suggests that Facebook use can increase depression and anxiety symptoms. His conclusion is that social media is clearly very good for advertisers, but not for users. Although Chandler's perspective is broad and he uses evidence to back up his claims, the connections he makes between rates of anxiety and depression in 2020 and increased social media use, are tenuous. The Covid 19 pandemic and government restrictions on movement around the world is likely a significant contributor that he does not elaborate on. There is also little balance provided in his argument that social media does not allow for meaningful connections. This is likely due to space constraints in articles published by Forbes.

Commented [A7]: Implies relevance to the inquiry.

Commented [A8]: Key lessons learned from the source effectively shared.

Kross, E., et al. (2020) Social Media and Well-Being: Pitfalls, Progress, and Next Steps <https://www.cell.com/action/showPdf?pii=S1364-6613%2820%2930251-5> *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, January 2021, Vol. 25, No. 1

This research was made possible with funding from Facebook and the John Templeton Foundation who works closely with the Bezos Family Foundation, an organisation established by parents of Jeff Bezos of Amazon. This brings into question how reliable the results might be as they may be influenced by their benefactors.

The paper itself is a meta-analysis, using statistical tools that aggregate effect sizes across studies to allow for the detection of significant effects (Kross, E). This meta-analysis is based on wide ranging research that gives us information on social media use and the impact of this. As other articles have said, overall, social media use has resulted in a small increase in anxiety and depression in users. However, this paper goes further to distinguish between types of social media use, active or passive. Active use where the user is connecting socially with others is shown to improve mental wellbeing. Passive use, by contrast, is where users are simply viewers, who compare themselves against others and is more strongly linked to poor mental health. This paper has gone through a

Commented [A9]: Questions background of the source. While this is more evaluation than a technical description, it is clearly relevant and shows critical understanding of the source.

Commented [A10]: Implies relevance to the inquiry.

peer review process that is consistent for all Cell Press publications. It provides a deeper and more balanced look at social media use that allows more reliable conclusions to be drawn than news articles on the topic.

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