

BURNT OUT: CHANGING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS
SURROUNDING A LIFE ONLINE

by

SAMANTHA PIEROTTI

A THESIS

Presented to the School of Journalism and Communication
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

May 2024

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Samantha Pierotti for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the School of Journalism and Communication to be taken June 2024

Title: Burnt Out: Changing Attitudes and Behaviors Surrounding a Life Online

Approved: Professor Mark Blaine
Primary Thesis Advisor

This thesis explores Generation Z's current relationship with sharing their lives online. Research is carried out in the format of a research paper that provides essential background information and nationwide perspectives on Generation Z moving away from living life online or expressing discomfort about their online presence. From these articles and statistics, the hypothesis that Generation Z is burnt out on social media is drawn. This hypothesis is then localized through interviews with University students and young people in Eugene about their relationships with social media. Through this research, one can look critically at the attitudes and behaviors that members of Generation Z have about living their lives online.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
My Research Questions:	7
Background and Significance	8
Continuing a Trend	13
Literature Review: “Luddite Teens Don’t Want Your Likes”	16
Research and Discussion	20
Conclusion	24
Bibliography	26

Introduction:

Being a part of the Honors College is about looking closely at the systems I partake in every day. I first had my idea for my thesis after my long hiatus from Instagram ended in September of 2023. I was a heavy social media user in high school and the first part of college, but the older I got, the more headache-inducing logging into my profile became. Scrolling on my phone, something I used to enjoy, had lost almost all of its appeal. I wanted to find out why.

I also knew I wanted to create a zine for my thesis, but had not narrowed the focus from the overly broad “interview-based folkloric magazine” idea. I wanted to determine how my peers felt about their online presence and realized that they might feel the same way as me: burnt out.

At the beginning of this process, I had a lot of questions, most of which made it into my interviews. I started each interview with the same question: “What is your relationship like with social media right now?” Some sources would laugh, or roll their eyes, but most of them let out a sort of exasperated sigh. “Not good,” was a sentiment Nate Rassmasun conveyed in the first interview that I conducted. “I’m wasting way too much time on my phone.” This sentence, or iterations of it, were repeated throughout my ten interviews.

From there, interviews would bounce around. The full list of questions that I presented to each interviewee was:

- 1) Please spell out your name and state your pronouns for me.
- 2) What is your current relationship with social media like?
- 3) Do you feel like you waste time on social media?
- 4) When did you start using social media?
- 5) What is your screen time?

- 6) Have you noticed any changes or continuity in social media platforms since you've been a part of them?
- 7) What are your likes and dislikes?
- 8) Is there anything else you would like to add?

From here, the interviews could go almost anywhere. Just like falling into an internet rabbit hole, each source had a unique relationship to their socials, filled with vibrant niches and practices. Some, like Maggie Dobson and Emeline Tarter, regularly use platforms like Reddit that I never frequent. Others, like Molly Ojeda, have a screen time that sometimes enters the double digits. Everyone that I have spoken to has something negative to say amidst the positives of being online. Whether they were complaining about their screen time being too high, a low social battery, or fear of missing out, everyone struggled with something about navigating their online presence. Each interview ended with people reflecting on how happy they were to talk about their social media usage. “This is not a conversation I get to have very often,” Maya McLeroy said.

We do record information about social media, but it's often locked in statistics and coded language. One of the questions that arose when I started doing my initial research in 477: Thesis Orientation was how we could personalize data about social media to tell a story. I thought an interview-based zine coupled with my research paper would serve this question well. In my paper, I could collect and analyze information offered to researchers on a nationwide scale. Then, in my zine, I could personalize the data that I found through my interviews.

Putting the information I gathered in my interviews into a zine forced me to choose the most unique parts of each conversation and condense them into neat snapshots. I wanted to produce a physical product for my thesis to act as an antithesis to the digitization that I write

about in my paper. Online content can be lengthy, with soft word counts and big pictures. While creating my zine, I had to choose if I wanted to keep an important paragraph or include a visual on that page. Circulation would be hard as well, with no captive audience on Instagram or TikTok to force-feed my content to. Creating a physical object has given me perspective into the struggles and triumphs of working in “old-school” media, and helped me further understand the positives and negatives of the digitization our culture is facing.

Creating a zine would also help us distill our current relationships with social media and preserve them for future generations. While 14 years (the lifetime on Instagram so far) may seem large now, in the span of history it is a blink of an eye. And as modern consumers know, social media sites go out of style as quickly as they rise to popularity. Older apps like Friendster, Myspace, and Vine have nothing left but a shallow digital footprint. What if Instagram or Facebook, websites that we’ve spent our whole lives sharing with, are next? I hope that my zine helps capture cultural opinions on social media and preserve them for future generations, and personalizes the data that is already being published about social media usage so we can understand our current relationships with it in the future.

My Research Questions:

- How does Generation Z use social media in 2023 and 2024?
- Are people moving off social media? Are they moving off social media as a countercultural statement?
- How can we personalize statistics about social media to tell a story?
- How can we capture cultural opinions on social media and preserve them for future generations?

Background and Significance:

In the last 30 years, social media has taken the world by storm. A study from the University of Maine explains that there are 4.8 billion social media users worldwide, “representing 59.9% of the population and 92.7% of all internet users.”¹ Another statistic from the same study claims that “[t]here were 150 million new social media users between April 2022 and April 2023 – a 3.2% increase year-over-year. If we break those numbers down, it equals approximately 410,000 new social users every day – and 4.7 every second.”² More than half of the world has a profile on a social media platform, and almost all internet users are active on social media. These statistics are astounding, especially considering that most platforms have been founded within the last 20 years. A recent study from Pew Research called “Social Media Fact Sheet” tracked social media’s popularity over the past twelve years. It shows that YouTube is the most popular app across generations, followed by Facebook and Instagram. More recently founded apps, like TikTok and Reddit, have less information to track but still show a steady increase in their user bases in recent years.

“Social Media Fact Sheet” also breaks down social media usage by age group. The table shows that people aged 18-29 are the most active on Instagram, Youtube, Reddit, and TikTok while they fall behind older generations in activity on Facebook and WhatsApp.³ These statistics raise questions, like “Why don’t younger people use Facebook?” or “Why are Millennials more

¹ Nyst, Annabelle. “Social Media Statistics Details - Undiscovered Maine - University of Maine.” Undiscovered Maine, December 29, 2023. <https://umaine.edu/undiscoveredmaine/small-business/resources/marketing-for-small-business/social-media-tools/social-media-statistics-details/>

² Ibid

³“Social Media Fact Sheet.” Pew Research Center, January 31, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/?tabId=tab-5b319c90-7363-4881-8e6f-f98925683a2f>

active on Facebook than Instagram?” And, if you’re part of a generation where everyone always talks about hating their phones, you might wonder, “Are these numbers really still going up?”

One of the first instances claiming a mass social media exodus came from an article published by Virginia Hefferman in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2009. Facebook was founded in 2004, making this five years after its conception. A quote from the article claims that “[t]he exodus is not evident from the site’s overall numbers.” Hefferman explains that according to comScore, Facebook attracted 87.7 million unique visitors in the United States in July. “But while people are still joining Facebook and compulsively visiting the site, a small but noticeable group are fleeing — some of them ostentatiously,” she writes.⁴

Hefferman’s piece specifically details the loss of Scrabulous, a Scrabble-adjacent word game that Facebook used to offer before it was pulled because of copyright issues. According to Hefferman, Scrabulous was one of the main draws of Facebook, and when it was taken off the site people were less likely to engage. But she also includes other user’s dissent and flees from the app. People complained of wasting time, being tired of seeing everyone else’s performative posts, and the shallowness of online friendship. These users simply grew tired of Facebook and deleted their profiles, or logged out or became inactive. But this exodus, or any exodus, is not reflected anywhere in the graph Pew Research put together on “Social Media Fact Sheet”. The number of Facebook users has either remained the same or increased each year since Pew started tracking engagement in 2012.⁵

A recent article from the *New York Post* shares similar sentiments to Hefferman’s piece, only 13 years later. “Despite the potential for withdrawals — read: FOMO, or fear of missing out

⁴ Hefferman, Virginia. “Facebook Exodus.” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/magazine/30FOB-medium-t.html>

⁵ “Social Media Fact Sheet” Pew Research Center

— some users are quitting social media cold turkey, with a wave of anti-app Zoomers spurring a larger movement to unplug, despite living in a device-driven age,” Brooke Kato writes in her piece “Gen Z is embracing #monkmode”.⁶ Looking past the buzzwords, the message in Kato’s argument is the same. Users are moving off social media because they are tired of the digital landscape, for one reason or another. The hashtag #monkmode has amassed over 76 million views on TikTok, according to the piece. The hashtag is filled with young people trying to explain the benefits of going off social media, as a break or permanently. These benefits include having less anxiety, a longer attention span, being more productive, getting more sleep, and overall feeling better, according to an array of TikTok videos under the tag.

While these people are cutting down on their social media time and moving away from it, the actual number of people leaving social media is very small. As Hefferman talks about in her piece, she notices a trend of people talking about leaving social media and people that she knows deactivating their profiles, but the actual number of users are not going down. A similar phenomenon continues today, which Kato demonstrates in her piece for the New York Post. Generation Z is expressing discomfort with living their lives online and having conversations about why they don’t like being on social media. But they are still on social media, posting these complaints to the internet. What is the tipping point for going off social media completely? And how much negative is Generation Z willing to tolerate from social media sites to reap the positive benefits of being online?

A study done in 2019 called “The Welfare Effects of Social Media” demonstrates the effects of going off social media that Kato and Hefferman write about tangibly. The study, which

⁶ Kato, Brooke. “Gen Z Is Embracing #MonkMode - by Turning off Social Media.” New York Post, October 5, 2023. <https://nypost.com/2023/10/05/gen-z-is-embracing-monkmode-by-turning-off-social-media>

was done by New York University and Stanford University, split 2,743 people into two groups. One was a control group, who continued to use Facebook as normal. The other group quit using Facebook for four weeks. During the four weeks the study ran and afterward, researchers “evaluate[d] the extent to which time on Facebook substitutes for alternative online and offline activities, with particular attention to news consumption and face-to-face social interactions.”⁷ The researchers noted many reasons for fielding this study in their introduction. First, they lay down some of the positive outcomes of social media, which has made it easier to organize protests and encourage activism, as well as decreasing the cost and barrier to socializing.⁸ The introduction also details some negatives of social media, saying that “[a]dverse outcomes such as suicide and depression appear to have risen sharply over the same period that the use of smartphones and social media has expanded.”⁹

The results of “The Welfare Effects of Social Media” were telling. Researchers placed a disclaimer of sorts at the beginning of their conclusion section, saying that the answers that participants gave to the free-response section made it clear that Facebook can help improve lives, whether that’s through entertainment, news coverage, or social connection. “Any discussion of social media’s downsides should not obscure the basic fact that it fulfills deep and widespread needs,” researchers found.¹⁰ After four weeks without Facebook, participants in the study were found to be less informed on current events, less politically polarized, more in tune with their wellbeing, and less likely to want to use Facebook.¹¹ “All but one of the ten points estimates [on subjective well-being] are positive,” and “point estimates are negative for all polarization

⁷ Allcott, Hunt et. al ["The Welfare Effects of Social Media"](#) New York University and Stanford University, November 8, 2019

⁸ Ibid, Introduction

⁹ Ibid, Introduction

¹⁰ Ibid, Conclusion

¹¹ Ibid, Conclusion

measures” the study found.¹² It draws similarities between addiction attitudes and user's attitudes towards social media, saying that the usage pattern is similar.

Generation Z currently dominates the online landscape according to PEW Research. A McKinsey Health Institute Study shows that Generation Z, or current 18-26-year-olds, are more likely to speak lowly of social media. 18% of Generation Z report their mental health is poor or very poor, as opposed to 13% of Millennials, 11% of Gen X, and 6% of Baby Boomers. The study also points out that although all generations are using social media, Generation Z and Millennials are the most likely to report using it heavily. 35% of Generation Z spend more than two hours a day on social media, while 24% of Millennials, 17% of Generation X, 14% of Generation X, and 14% of Baby Boomers use social media for more than 2 hours a day.¹³

This context sets the stage for my zine, and for the research that I’ve carried out during the length of my thesis. I chose to focus on the social media usage of my peers, Generation Z, to highlight the dichotomy of social media usage that is happening right now. These statistics demonstrate the intense nature of social media usage for my generation. People of all generations are using social media heavily, but my generation grew up in a world that has access to social media, which is demonstrated in the statistics. Because we have always had access to social media, it has become central to our lives. And while social media has many positives, Quitting social media, or going “monk mode” as the New York Post would call it, is harder for our generation than it is for others.

¹² Ibid, Effects on Political and News Outcomes

¹³ Coe, Erica et. al “Gen Z Mental Health: The impact of tech and social media” McKinsey Health Institute, April 28, 2023

Continuing a Trend:

Rebellion against new technology is far from cutting edge. As Hefferman demonstrated in her article on the social media exodus in 2009, consumers have been rebelling against social media since its inception. Like socializing or receiving news, other aspects of our lives have been digitized within the last 20-30 years, leading to questions about what role physicality plays in activating our senses. In “Jingling the Single: The ipodification of the Music Industry” Tara Brabazon explains that listening to music was a multi-sensory experience when vinyl reigned supreme.

“Vinyl activated most of our senses,” she writes, “touch: as the stylus hit the groove, sight: through watching the revolving record and hearing, with the crackling anticipation before the track began.”¹⁴ She notes that the transition to the compact disc erased some of those connections; instead of watching the vinyl spin, it secretly revolves in a private plastic container. But what the compact disc lost in physicality it made up for in sound quality. “Aural literacies drowned touch and sight,” she wrote.¹⁵ Brabazon argues that transforming music into something downloadable onto a preexisting platform leads to a less complete music listening experience. Since 2004, when ringtone sales started outselling CDs, listening to music has only engaged one of the senses. Brabazon also points out that iPod, and now iPhone, listening culture leads to the repetition of the same favorite song over and over instead of listening to an album or playlist as a whole. “The fillers - and indeed the original linear presentation of the album - are lost,” she says.¹⁶ But, similarly to social media, consumers have not stood by idly while music is flattened

¹⁴ Brabazon, Tara, Felicity Cull, Mike Kent, and Leanne McRae. “Jingling the Single: The i-Podification of the Music Industry.” *AQ: Australian Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2005): 26–40.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 26

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 26

into a one-dimensional experience. Vinyl sales in the U.S. were 21.7% up from previous years for the first half of 2023, with Taylor Swift’s album “Midnights” leading the pack.¹⁷

Vinyl has been increasing in sales steadily since the turn of the century. According to Luminate's mid-year report, “2022 marked the 17th consecutive year that the sale of vinyl records rose.”¹⁸ The report lists Lana del Rey, boygenius, and Melanie Martinez as other top sellers, along with Fleetwood Mac’s album “Rumors”.¹⁹ The resurgence of vinyl is not only coveted by people born before streaming services were popular. Swift, del Rey, and Martinez all have audiences of primarily young women. This correlation is not strong enough to claim that young people are moving away from digital streaming, but it also proves that younger generations crave physicality. While most music heads are not only listening to vinyl, a duality of physical and digital music exists, much like with social media and in person socializing.

Photography has undergone a similar process as music these past 30 years. A process that once activated multiple senses shooting on film has become as simple as swiping and tapping a few buttons on an iPhone. Film has undergone a similar resurgence as vinyl in the past five years, with film becoming a more popular and more expensive medium to shoot on. Emma Grillo looks at the modern popularization of film photography through the lens of wedding photography in her article “In the Digital Age, Wedding Film Photography has a Resurgence.” Weddings, one of the oldest human traditions, are starting to lean towards film instead of digital. Anna Urban, a wedding photographer based in the U.K., said that film helps create magic and ephemera around a wedding. “The whole process [of shooting film] is different,” Urban said. “You don’t see the effect until you have them scanned and developed. It’s like part of the magic,

¹⁷ Horton, Adrian. “US vinyl sales up 21.7% for first half of 2023, report finds” The Guardian, 12 July 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2023/jul/12/vinyl-sales-us-report>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

waiting for the photos.”²⁰ Another photographer, Kate Hampson, said that she “never felt inspired shooting digital.”²¹ Hampson used to only shoot digitally at weddings but then started bringing her film camera and doing shoots half and half. Eventually, she started doing entire shoots with film with a digital backup that she sometimes uses. Hampson feels that film captures more emotion and brings a special touch to weddings that digital doesn’t provide.

Wedding photographers are not the only ones who have started shooting film again recently. The price of the Contax T2 camera reached it’s highest selling price in 2018, although the camera was originally released in 1990.²² In an opinion piece, Tom Grimbert writes about why he thinks younger generations are finding a new fascination with film photography. “We live in an era where there have never been so many photographers,” Grimbert said in his post. “The quantity of photographers and good photos out there is huge, therefore the attention and impact of every image is lower.”²³ Grimbert thinks that the resurgence of film has to do with a craving for authenticity, and a want to differ photos aesthetically from the masses of photos available online. When everyone is a photographer, and beautiful photos are readily available on social media platforms, photographers have to find a way to make their photos special.

²⁰ Grillo, Emma. “In the Digital Age, Wedding Film Photography Has a Resurgence.” The New York Times, May 4, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/04/style/in-the-digital-age-wedding-film-photography-has-a-resurgence.html>

²¹ Ibid

²² Grimbert, Tom. “Millennial’s view on film photography in 2020” Medium, 2020 <https://medium.com/@tom.grimbert/the-return-of-film-photography-in-2019-3cf4f479758c>

²³ Ibid

Literature Review:

The Luddite Teens are a group of teenagers who live in New York City. They go through the normal trials and tribulations of teenage life: drama, breakups, schoolwork, but one thing is different: they are moving away from social media, and the digital landscape, and towards more old-fashioned ways of communicating. The article “Luddite Teens Don’t Want Your Likes” details the highs and lows this group of teens has while quitting social media and reintroducing analog media into their lives. The major themes of this piece, and the podcast episode “The Teens are Offline” by “Borrowed: Stories that Start at the Brooklyn Public Library”, are the triumphs and failures of the Luddites, and the near impossibility of living without a digital footprint in the modern era. The Luddites think social media, and iPhones, create a double standard for their generation. Logan Lane, the founder of the Luddite Club in New York, said “I couldn’t post a good picture if I had one. And I had this online personality of, ‘I don’t care,’ but I did. I was still watching everything.”²⁴

The Luddite Club centers its ideology on decreasing screen time and increasing in-person socializing. Group members value pastimes like reading, music, and crafts instead of scrolling on their phones. Club members vary in their dedication to the anti-technology sentiment of the Luddites. More dedicated members ditch their iPhones for flip phones, but newbies can settle for silencing their phones during club meetings and deleting their social media profiles. When writing the manifesto for the Luddite Club, Lane said that she “fantasized about throwing her phone Gowanus Canal.”²⁵ She locked her iPhone in a box and then lost it while on a school trip to Paris. Her parents were fed up with her fanatics and bought her a flip phone so they could

²⁴ Vadukul, Alex. “‘Luddite’ Teens Don’t Want Your Likes.” The New York Times, December 15, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/15/style/teens-social-media.html>

²⁵ Ibid

check in on her. Now the flip phone is the golden standard to reach for in the Luddite Club, and the more dedicated club members all sport one. “I still long to have no phone at all,” Land said. “My parents are so addicted. My mom got on Twitter, and I’ve seen it tear her apart.”²⁶

There are downsides to being a so-called Luddite and opposers to the Luddite club. When interviewed, Lane’s parents confide the struggles of not being able to track their daughter. They feel as if tracking Logan is normal, although they understand it could be seen as an invasion of privacy.²⁷ Lane’s classmates have pointed out that being a Luddite isn’t accessible to everyone. “One kid said it’s classist,” she said to the New York Times. “I think the club’s nice because I get a break from my phone, but I get their point.”²⁸ Lane acknowledges the downfalls of not using social media and has felt alienated from some of her peers for stepping back from the digital realm. But Lane doesn’t mind. If anything, she said it feels like she narrowed down who she wanted her real friends to be.

Speaking in an interview from “Borrowed: Stories that Start at the Brooklyn Library,” Lane talks about the benefits of having a flip phone. She says that texting, T9 style, takes up a lot more time, so she usually ends up calling people to communicate with them. “It takes up a lot of time, but I think if you really count it up, maybe you spend like an hour on your flip phone every single day and ... versus even if it’s easier to type on a smartphone, it gets to 7 hours because it’s just so addictive,” she says, contrasting how she would use her iPhone versus how she uses her flip phone.²⁹ Lane likes putting a lot of energy into sending texts because it makes her think

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Post, Ali. “The Teens Are Offline.” Brooklyn Public Library, May 30, 2023. <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/podcasts/teens-are-offline>

harder about what she's going to say. It also makes digital communication feel more special to her.

When speaking on how she uses her flip phone from day to day, Lane says “[M]y phone is so boring. Like, I'm always surprised at how like, not fun it is. And if no one's texting me, I'm just like, this flip phone sucks. And that's like the whole point. It's supposed to suck. Like I don't want it to be something that I really want to use all the time.” She enjoys the monotony of working on a tiny screen. Sometimes Lane notices herself falling back into old habits when she has access to an iPhone.

“I go to my mom's phone sometimes, like, particularly on road trips, she'll have me do directions. And I am just so, I'm so surprised [by my behavior]... every single time I just notice myself falling back into old habits,” she says in an interview with Borrowed.³⁰ “And maybe I'll go on Instagram or I go through my mom's texts, which is so messed up, but I'm like, whatever. I do, like really toxic things like that.” She describes this behavior as feeling like relapsing into an addiction, something that she's ashamed of but has a hard time stopping.

Biruk, another member of the Luddite club, explained that she was having a hard time transitioning to college while not having an iPhone. In 2022, these pieces were published, most of the Luddites were seniors in high school. The looming nature of college stood ahead of them, and moving into an unfamiliar landscape without an iPhone was challenging. Biruk made an Instagram account to try and make some friends from school before she went, and then deleted it, and then remade it. “Like the school that I want to go to, you need safety apps for it,” she said. She wouldn't be able to download these apps onto her flip phone. “So, it's like, okay, what do

³⁰ Ibid

you do now? Like, how am I supposed to function as a young adult in this world not wanting an iPhone?”³¹

“Luddite Teens Don’t Want Your Likes” and “The Teens are Offline” provide a more personal angle of what other data about Generation Z’s cellphone usage attempts to demonstrate. I wanted to mimic this personal angle in my zine, interviewing people about what their social media habits were like, and what they would do if they weren’t using social media so heavily. It is important to include a personal angle in social media usage because it makes the data that is already known more digestible and easier to visualize for readers. Lane’s message and angle shaped the way that I saw my zine, making me wonder what my generation would do if it wasn’t spending endless hours scrolling.

³¹ Ibid

My Research and Discussion:

My experience interviewing my peers and making my zine reflected everything that is demonstrated in this paper. My interviewees talked about their anxiety surrounding being on social media, and the struggles of being off of it or taking long breaks. I found a number of similarities between their sentiments and the ones expressed by the Luddite teens in New York. Both groups talked about the performative nature of social media and how exhausting it can be, along with the social stigma that comes with being off social media entirely.

A theme that stood out to me from my interviews and academic research was what people are willing to tolerate to be on social media, or what they're willing to tolerate to be off social media. There are benefits and downfalls to each experience. Maya McLeroy talked about the creative inspiration she draws from other artists on Instagram who share their poetry with her. But when she is on Instagram, she often doesn't have time to create because she is distracted by her phone. A similar dichotomy exists for Emeline Tartar. Tartar loves to engage with the internet to learn more about the movies, TV shows, and video games she likes. But she often gets stuck down internet rabbit holes, running into opinions that make her sad, angry, or uncomfortable. For these interviewees, maintaining a presence on the internet is a delicate balancing act. But it's one that they have to partake in to reap the benefits of the digital age, like unlimited access to information and art.

The statistics I reference in the background section of this paper tell us what we need to know about how social media affects us. In "The Welfare Effects of Social Media", people reported having better mental health and a longer attention span after taking time away from social media. They also reported being less politically informed and feeling more likely to listen to people's opinions that differ from their own. The "Social Media Fact Sheet" from Pew

Research had findings in a similar thread. Gen Z, who according to Pew is the most likely to report having bad mental health, also reports that their mental health is worse the the higher their screen time is.

There is a comparison to be drawn between the way that social media is marketed to it's users and the way cigarettes were marketed to smokers when smoking was still in vogue. In her boook "Merchants of Doubt," Naiomi Oreskes poses the question "How could prominent scientists – on the wrong side of the scientific consensus on all these controversies – become such pit bulls against inconvenient science?"³² "Merchants of Doubt" touches on how scientists framed the issue of smoking while tobacco companies were dumping money in their pockets, something which might be happening with social media right now. Social media and cigarettes are both marketed as stylish things to do, hip for young people, and relatively harmless until more information came out about them.

When no smoking ads and campaigns started coming out, people were hesitant to quit their habit. Cigarette sales declined in 1953, when the first evidence of a link between lung cancer and cigarettes was published, but then was right back up in 1954 with the introduction of filtered cigarettes. In 1957, the US Public Health Service published its first official statement implicating cigarette smoke as a cause of lung cancer. However, "Medical doctors and academic scholars were hired to defend the industry's claim that the evidence was "merely statistical" or based only on "animal evidence."³³ Here begins the long back and forth between marketing

³² Oreskes, Naiomi "Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming" Article in Orinthology, April 2011

³³ Cummings, K Michael, and Robert N Proctor. "The Changing Public Image of Smoking in the United States: 1964-2014." Cancer epidemiology, biomarkers & prevention : a publication of the American Association for Cancer Research, cosponsored by the American Society of Preventive Oncology, January 2014. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3894634/>.

campaigns and medical communities, battling about what message they could get Americans to believe about cigarettes.

Although a lot of people expressed discomfort and unhappiness about their smoking habit, and statistics started coming out about how it was unhealthy, it was impossible to change cultural opinions about smoking overnight. National No Smoking Day, which was introduced in the UK in the 1980s, illustrates the cultural opinions about smoking at the time. According to a piece by the Guardian published in 1999, “a million British smokers will try to quit nicotine on No Smoking Day, and there is more help for them than ever.”³⁴ But the same piece explains that not everyone was interested in quitting. “Rod Liddle, [writing in his column in 2003](#), bemoaned the existence of 'national days' generally, saying that his one aim on No Smoking Day was to 'double my usual intake of nicotine',” he wrote.³⁵

All of the interviewees in “Burnt Out” expressed discomfort with partaking in a life online. Today, we are stuck in a similar space between science and corporations that cigarette smokers were stuck in 30 years ago. Scientific data illustrating that social media is bad for our mental health and should be used in moderation, if at all, is coming out. But websites keep on updating, like cigarettes getting new filters, claiming that the new version is going to improve the experience for the user.

Although everyone except for Brier and Jones regularly maintains their social media profiles, everyone expressed some sentiment about wanting to be on their phone less. What can be done to address this discomfort? Calling for a total reversion to analog consumption is impractical and not accomplishable. Modern technology, and how we’ve interwoven it into our

³⁴ Stoddard, Katy. “When No Smoking Day Was Still Big News.” The Guardian, March 14, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2012/mar/14/archive-no-smoking-day>.

³⁵ Ibid

lives, cannot be completely abandoned within our current societal framework. Asking for a total return to print media or bulletin boards or vinyl music would be like asking to use whale blubber or kerosene to heat our houses again. People still want to use these things, but in small amounts, when it is convenient to them. Like with cigarettes, we need to find our cultural tipping point: what is too much?

Conclusion

Now that living a life within the digital framework is under scrutiny, what can we do to reframe it and move away from negativity? We truly have amazing tools at our disposal: the ability to communicate instantly with people across the world, information at our fingertips, art more accessible than it has ever been. But all of this wonder and amazement is watered down through normality and capitalism. Because social media is easy to access and normalized, it no longer seems special. And because we operate within a capitalist society, companies want to make money on our attention any way they can, making us susceptible to advertisements and sponsored media that subconsciously affect the way we engage with the internet. Companies like Meta want to keep our eyes glued to our screens for as long as they can, activating our addictive tendencies to

There is no correct way to navigate living in the digital age. Although technology has been developing for the last thirty years, we are truly living as our own guinea pigs, navigating uncharted waters, flying without a captain. There is no perfect guidebook on how to handle screen time or how to be yourself online. The best thing that we can do for ourselves is have conversations about our screen time and be candid with each other about the different ways we use social media. A lot of the interviewees I spoke with for this project expressed gratitude to me, or towards this project in general when I asked them if they had anything else to add at the end of the interview. McLeroy explained that she “doesn’t get to talk about this stuff very much, even though it’s something that [she] thinks about all the time.” Being open and willing to engage in conversation around social media usage is enough to let us reflect on the ways we are living and what we are doing when we’re online. Being mindful that social media is not truly a

social space, but instead is a space infested with advertisements and companies trying to influence us, is something else important to keep in mind.

There is no perfect way to be a consumer. Going completely back to print media, using vinyl CDs, or film photography would be like using whale blubber to light our houses. Under the correct conditions, vintage goods are fun and satisfying to use. But as we see in “The Teens are Offline”, it is nearly impossible to exist in a world without using modern media. And as we see in “Burnt Out”, the digital realm almost impossible to navigate rationally. Interviewees like Tartar and Rasmussen spoke on how easy it is to get sucked into a scroll cycle, and Collins-Burke had to set up an intensely militant system to keep his screentime in check. Maybe soon, like with cigarettes, we’ll find out that “there is no safe level of secondhand smoke,”³⁶ or no amount of internet usage is safe for young adults and have to choose between life online and offline. But for now, we can only try to curb our habits, and be candid with ourselves and others about how we use the internet.

³⁶ “General Information about Secondhand Smoke.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 14, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/secondhand-smoke/about.html#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20safe%20level,health%20problems%20and%20be%20deadly>.

Bibliography:

- Cummings, K Michael, and Robert N Proctor. "The Changing Public Image of Smoking in the United States: 1964-2014." *Cancer epidemiology, biomarkers & prevention* : a publication of the American Association for Cancer Research, cosponsored by the American Society of Preventive Oncology, January 2014. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3894634>
- "General Information about Secondhand Smoke." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 14, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/secondhand-smoke/about.html#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20safe%20level,health%20problems%20and%20be%20deadly>
- Grillo, Emma. "In the Digital Age, Wedding Film Photography Has a Resurgence." *The New York Times*, May 4, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/04/style/in-the-digital-age-wedding-film-photography-has-a-resurgence.html>
- Heffernan, Virginia. "Facebook Exodus." *The New York Times*, August 26, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/magazine/30FOB-medium-t.html>
- Kato, Brooke. "Gen Z Is Embracing #MonkMode - by Turning off Social Media." *New York Post*, October 5, 2023. <https://nypost.com/2023/10/05/gen-z-is-embracing-monkmode-by-turning-off-social-media/>
- Oreskes, Naomi "Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming" Article in *Ornithology*, April 2011
- Nyst, Annabelle. "Social Media Statistics Details - Undiscovered Maine - University of Maine." *Undiscovered Maine*, December 29, 2023. <https://umaine.edu/undiscoveredmaine/small-business/resources/marketing-for-small-business/social-media-tools/social-media-statistics-details/>
- Post, Ali. "The Teens Are Offline." *Brooklyn Public Library*, May 30, 2023. <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/podcasts/teens-are-offline>
- "Social Media Fact Sheet." *Pew Research Center*, January 31, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/?tabId=tab-5b319c90-7363-4881-8e6f-f98925683a2f>
- Stoddard, Katy. "When No Smoking Day Was Still Big News." *The Guardian*, March 14, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2012/mar/14/archive-no-smoking-day>
- Vadukul, Alex. "'Luddite' Teens Don't Want Your Likes." *The New York Times*, December 15, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/15/style/teens-social-media.html>