

Always Leave Them Wanting More: Business in the Age of Scrolling, Reacting, and Posting

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“If you’re not paying for the product, you are the product.” This statement and its application to social media asks users to consider their social media platforms through a different lens. As people scroll through Facebook timelines and Twitter feeds, the platforms themselves can fade into the background. The inspiring posts and provoking comments take center stage, so that users feel immersed in a virtual town square. However, while no user assumes that the grounds of the town square have an agenda, social media platforms are businesses, not simply spaces in which to share thoughts. This unnerving acknowledgement highlights the transactional aspect of social media — because most social media sites are free, platforms must find sneakier ways to generate revenue, exploiting users in the process. Most social media profits come from advertisements; thus, the more views of an advertisement, the more revenue is generated for the platform (McFarlane). This business structure classifies social media users as the commodity, while the advertisers are the true clients. Thus, the sites’ objectives boil down to one mission: keep users scrolling. In an effort to increase interaction, social media sites capture users’ attention through deliberate psychological manipulation. Although social media sites market themselves as wholesome and respectable companies (McFarlane), ultimately their business designs unfairly capitalize on users’ natural susceptibility to addiction, characterizing social media as an exploitative industry.

The “checking” design of social media platforms fosters obsession with the sites so that users constantly dedicate their attention to the feed. To access information offered on social media sites, users must check the app or website. This checking behavior differs from ordinary, offline human conversation because it involves a fear of missing out. When users log off of a social media site, they exclude themselves from any interesting activity on the platform. Instead, the idea of possible entertainment through the site lingers. Users inevitably surrender to the

ever-present promise of new entertainment, and social media sucks them into the virtual world as they check the app or website.

Once a user checks social media, the platform offers many different ways to interact with the community on the site. The different levels of participation fall into the categories of passive scrolling, simple content creation with reactions, and involved content creation with posts. Passive scrolling exposes the user to the content that other users, whether their friends, followers, or strangers, have created. While scrolling, users maintain invisibility; social media sites rarely broadcast the presence of scrollers. Users can therefore make their presence known by reacting to posts with likes, favorites, retweets, and comments, for example. These reactions reflect the personality of the user; liked posts correspond to offline passions and retweets imply agreement. Thus, the activity of reaction on social media is more elaborate and calculated than simple scrolling. Even more involved is the act of posting. Whether a life update or impersonal opinion, posts are subject to approval or disapproval by the social media’s audience.

Each piece of social media’s three-pronged system of interaction attracts users to the site and captivates their attention differently. First, although scrolling is the most passive, it can be the most mesmerizing. Social media apps and websites often use vertical layouts, so that scrolling down reveals more content as the site constantly updates the feed with new posts and stories. Social media feeds are endless. This design encourages users to interact constantly with unlimited entertainment. Also, users can refresh their feed to pull up a totally new set of content, which incorporates a thrill of the unknown. The repetitive nature of passive scrolling combined with the occasional exciting moment of seeing a new post creates an addicting model that constantly promises more excitement for the small cost of the users’ time and attention. Most users cannot refuse this offer.

Similarly, the reaction stage of participation has become an addiction for many social media users. The opportunity for likes, shares, comments, and notifications triggers the brain's dopamine reward system. The brain's reaction to seeing a new like on a post is psychologically the same rush that gamblers experience from a roulette wheel or that cocaine users experience from the use of drugs: the neurotransmitter dopamine is released, which makes the users feel good ("Social Media Addiction"). Evolutionarily, dopamine release as a result of positive social interaction helped humans become communal creatures. Social media capitalizes on this natural psychological reaction in order to boost participation. Once users get a taste of notification dopamine, they seek more positive feedback from the social media site. As a result, social media has become a popular coping mechanism, as users flee to websites for positive feedback ("Social Media Addiction"). In addition, these dopamine hits have introduced a social etiquette around likes and comments on social media. When a close friend posts, social pressure requires friends to like the post and produce a witty, charming comment, so that the poster feels socially validated and can experience a dopamine rush. These online customs also boost participation with the site.

Lastly, content creation is the most socially risky, and so can spark the most addictive tendencies. The Addiction Center contends that one reason for such obsession over posts is their personal nature. Offline, "people talk about themselves around 30 to 40% of the time," while on social media, "people talk about themselves a staggering 80% of the time" as they post life updates and celebrate accomplishments ("Social Media Addiction"). Even seemingly non-personal posts, such as restaurant reviews or advice columns, reflect opinions of the posters and are subject to the hunger for positive feedback. The design of social media centers positive feedback around posts; most expressions of social acceptance on social media are restricted to likes and to comments on posts. Thus, users obsess over the reactions to their posts, constantly checking the platform to learn more about its reception.

Social media's structure exploits human patterns of attention to boost interaction with their sites, and therefore interactions with advertisements. The spikes of dopamine that users experience with new notifications are natural and can be healthy. Humans evolved to derive

motivation from dopamine in order to keep pursuing positive goals, including social contentment ("Social Media Addiction"). However, such goals on social media are unachievable. Social media promises fulfillment in meaningful social interactions, but most online communication is self-centered and shallow. The social sites guarantee the feeling of acceptance through just the right number of likes, but in reality, no number of likes can be high enough. By promising meaningful aspects of fellowship but providing only a shell of them, social media exploits basic physiological reactions to keep its users checking, scrolling, liking, and posting.

The encouragement of addiction and obsession pervades the designs of social media sites, all so that users will participate more with the platform and therefore encounter more advertisements. Even worse, social media sites deliberately developed in pursuit of ensnaring their users. Sean Parker, a founder of Facebook who worked on the original design of the social network, warned that during the genesis of Facebook, "the thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, ... was all about: 'How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?'" (Allen). The biggest social media platform in the world founded itself upon the exploitation of human nature. Regardless of Facebook posts' impacts on society, as a business, the company's revenue is in fact generated through exploitation of weaknesses in the human psyche. Because of Facebook's influence in the social media business, many other sites have followed suit with a financial model based on addiction.

Rushing to their own defense, social media platforms claim that they merely provide pathways for connecting people (McFarlane). These gods of social interaction portray themselves as merely roads upon which users drive. Like roads, some trips on social media are smooth, and some involve collisions. On roads, drivers pass billboards, and on social media, users scroll past advertisements. In this analogy, social media seems innocent — because it seems silly to expect a road to take responsibility for any wrecks they produce. A road is only a link, and drivers must regulate themselves. This innocent, positive narrative is the one that social media sites promote in order to avoid any liability. In reality, users on social media sites do not have freedom over their use of the platform. Social media algorithms determine the content with which users interact, and these algorithms

even predict how users themselves will react to posts. Where roads are not reliant upon any addictive tendencies of their users, social media thrives on psychological manipulation. Most importantly, social media builds a sense of destination without delivering its users anywhere. When users check social media, they hope to find social fulfillment, but the shallow, insincere nature of social media cannot transport them there. Instead, only the revenue-generating aspect of this analogy can hold. As users scroll and scroll, hoping to arrive at contentment, they pass many billboards, and money lands in social media's pocket. Always leave them wanting more.

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