

Instagram's Toxicity

Introduction

One rarely hears me express displeasure at length. No single occurrence has hitherto offended me to the point of decrying it so publicly. But sometimes, one must express their vehemence loudly and clearly. I shall attempt to keep this concise by categorising my concerns under three headings:

1. Validation
2. Mental health concerns
3. Privacy concerns

This article concerns individuals posting to their accounts, rather than companies or charities. Their motivations are remunerable. I have no issue with the capitalist model of economics.

Recently, I deleted my Instagram account. Now, avoiding contradictions is something I've been working on for some time. Maintaining my account in spite of my reservations would constitute a contradiction in logic.

Many aspects of Instagram disturb me. These aspects range from the content which I see to the real dangers prevalent throughout the app.

Before I begin, I'd like to introduce a caveat into this diatribe. I recognise the perceived irony that I, by writing this, am seeking attention. While that may be true in part, my motivation is to open the eyes of those under Instagram's spell. I am attempting to allow you to see the problems of this social network through my eyes. I cannot say Instagram is without use in its entirety. Indeed, I enjoyed it for some time. But that time is over. For each cute hedgehog warming my heart; there are ten shallow, conceited, blind folk who do not understand the privilege of being alive. It is these who vex me most. It is these who most need to comprehend.

Validation

When one acts, they do so for a reason. Finding that reason is often difficult. Perhaps because we convince ourselves that our motivations are pure. One might want to post a picture with their friends on a night out to reaffirm their friendship. One might desire to draw attention to their fine 'beach body' because they think they have worked hard. One could even have truly enjoyed their one cocktail at some trendy bar and felt the need to share it with their following. There is a common thread throughout individuals posting – the resulting validation.

Let's delve into this more deeply. Validation is defined as "recognition or affirmation that a person or their feelings or opinions are valid or worthwhile.". The 'like' function of Instagram acts as a form of validation. One's following, and indeed others outside their following, access the content they have posted and express approval. People from anywhere in the world are free to comment on said photos also, providing insight into their approval or disapproval of the content posted.

On the face of it, there isn't much wrong with this basic schematic of Instagram posting. But when one analyses their true motivations, complications arise.

We frequently justify our actions with a view to convince our peers that the intentions backing the act are noble. We invent reasons to dilute the truth behind acts. These justifications take unlimited forms. You might be proud of a certain landmark in your life, like moving to a new house. You could be dressed in a pleasant outfit and feel the desire to show this outfit to your following. You may even be on holiday, enjoying yourself and feel obliged to impose your enjoyment on those around you.

Once we strip away surface-level justifications, only one conclusion remains: we are seeking validation.

This is not necessarily a negative conclusion, it is neutral in itself. Our dependence on it is the true culprit. The danger of depending on validation through social media is alarming. This is not restricted to Instagram. This applies across the board – to Facebook and to Snap Chat and other platforms which allow one to share content relating to their current situation.

It is my view that we have become dependent on one kind of validation – the digital kind. No longer is it enough to go to a new place; visit a monument or dress well. In times gone by, one would ascribe value being complimented in their workplace or sharing their experiences with loved ones to spread joy. Experiencing places; faces; eateries etc. with the people in one's environment was enough to assign value to said experience. An act had value because one enjoyed it at the time. Value was real-time.

Now, one's sphere has been enlarged from the domestic to a global context. And one's ego has swelled to meet its engorged audience. To understand the problem of dependence on this new hollow digital validation, we must delve even deeper. We must look at our own value system.

Why and how do we ascribe value in the modern context?

We have fallen into the open arms of Instagram without stopping to question why. The value we used to ascribe to our collective enjoyment of actions has shifted. We used to own our enjoyment, now it belongs to somebody else.

That shifting in the centre of our valuing acts really disturbs me. I see it constantly. Posters seem to have forgotten that one can enjoy something for themselves without needing to showcase their whereabouts. Have we truly become so shallow that we cannot open our eyes to the wonders of our surroundings? Can prolific posters honestly claim they would visit the places they go to if there were no opportunity to spread the news of having been there? I, sadly, think not.

The obvious and breath-taking change in how we assign value to acts is the first reason I rescinded myself from Instagram

Mental Health Concerns

Social media in general has been proven to cause unhappiness. But going further, it has the potential to create anxiety and depression if used excessively. A survey of 1000 Generation Z individuals (people born mid 1990s-early 2000s) uncovered 41% of people find social media makes them feel sad; anxious or depressed.

One's self esteem does understandably take a hit when perusing the aesthetically perfect profiles abounding. All that time spent by others desperately seeking the best poses; lighting and environs to showcase aspects of their lives in a better way end up harming others. It is not healthy either to pretend

to lead a life which is 'better' than one's own or to compare your own environs to ones which have been altered beyond recognition. But people do.
The grass is always greener, is it not?

Instagram does precious little to assuage this lack of self-worth, directly perpetuated by the comparisons we draw. And the silly thing about it is that we are comparing our own lives to staged photographs; well-edited videos and invasive 'stories'.

Doctor Tim Bono, curator of [Healthista](#) blog puts it most succinctly:

“When we derive a sense of worth based on how we are doing relative to others, we place our happiness in a variable that is completely beyond our control.”

So, not only has the value of our actions shifted, the same shift can be visibly perceived in our sense of self-worth. The human connections and organic worth that we derived from the praise of our superiors has become warped. This shift is dangerous for our collective mental health. The dichotomy between reality and perception, which Instagram perpetuates, is stifling. I could write volumes about this, but I promised to be brief.

Essentially, the dichotomy goes to the very core of the human experience. Instagram's twisting our collective perception of hitherto ordinary situations is, frankly, unforgiveable.

But the effect of Instagram on our mental health does not stop at the comparative anxiety and impact on one's self worth. It sways the way we enjoy events in our lives (as aforementioned) by only allowing us to enjoy them if they can be recorded.

Having everything we desire at the touch or swipe of a finger has detrimental effects on our attention span. I find in my daily conversations that people cannot concentrate for more than a few minutes. Granted this might be on account of me being dull. In either case, I see people swiping up and down looking at pictures on their Facebook and Instagram feeds mid conversation! When did this conduct become acceptable?

We have become so ensnared in the social media web that basic human interaction is hindered.

Of course, it would be remiss of me not to mention sleep. How many of us can say with confidence that the last thing they look before drifting into sleep *isn't* their phone?

A study by [Sleep.org](#) found 71% of us sleep with our phones *in our hands*; within arm's reach or on a nightstand. This is useful when one uses their phone as an alarm. But, it is dangerous on account of our temptation to look at them before sleeping.

According to [Sleep.org](#); all smart devices “emit something called blue light, which is a type of light that the brain interprets as daylight. The blue light actually suppresses melatonin (a hormone which affects circadian rhythm and should increase when you are preparing for bedtime). The result: Your brain feels stimulated.”

Stimulating the brain is an excellent thing to do, indeed I hope those of you reading this on a screen feel enthused! However, doing so at 11pm can prevent you from getting to sleep.

To surmise, the effects of social media on mental health are expansive. Its abuse can lead to anxiety; depression; sleep deprivation; attention span and have dire consequences on our happiness. I will admit

that in the course of my Instagram journey, I experienced all of these symptoms. The time I lost and the countless experiences which this app has warped is not something I can readily accept.

This dangerous, potent weapon, aimed straight at my tenuous grip on sanity, is the second reason I freed myself from Instagram.

Privacy

The final aspect of this treatise will focus on privacy. This may seem like an obvious one. What one seldom considers is the vast amount of sensitive information they release when posting pictures. Whether posting while at an event or afterwards, you are in effect disclosing to the public at large:

- Your whereabouts
- Your clothing
- Your identity
- Your opinions on said event (posts are seldom without caption)
- Sometimes, who you are with, ergo the initial 3 points apply to those in attendance.

I find this extremely abnormal and undeniably dangerous. Whether your account is private or public, many people will have access to the aforesaid information. This means anyone in the vicinity can find you at very short notice. This is especially true of the 'Stories' feature. Putting aside the ignoble motivations behind showing off one's current activity live for all to see, one opens themselves to danger. Geo-tagged stories are linked up to local stories, which open one up to even more potential psychopaths.

One amusing anecdote among this quagmire of desolation is a story I read about some time ago. Two Canadians decided to post frequently about a glamorous cruise to Australia. Little did they know, Interpol were tracking them. As it turns out, the two were using this cruise as a front for dealing cocaine! Police arrested them and 95kg of cocaine was recovered.

Giving away your privacy, whatever your motivations, cannot end well for Instagram users. Either it makes one look desperate for attention, lacking the basic qualities to which praise is usually afforded. Or one's forged portrayed lifestyle is used as evidence by the police.

Your privacy is of huge importance. Daily, in the news, we hear stories of leaked information. The Cambridge Analytica scandal alone is perturbing enough. Why are we so disturbed by information being leaked, and used for nefarious purposes, when we willingly wax lyrical about our whereabouts and daily/hourly activities? Does it not seem a tad inconsistent?

On top of this one can see, in the Direct Message (DM) feature, when you were last online. Real time updates on your usage of the app have caused a stir. We infrequently stop to think that followers see when we like a photo or comment on a post. Even if one's profile is private, commenting on public profiles can be seen by anyone.

So, not only can anyone see your location from recent posts and stories, easily identifying you in a tumult of people, but they can also identify when you are looking at your phone, ergo off guard. These features can be turned off and the risk is limited if you have a private account, but the risk exists nonetheless.

Additionally, Instagram's privacy policy allows the harvesting of data on a mass scale. For example: "user provided information (like your email address and phone number), data on how people use Instagram through cookies, analytics from third-parties focusing on websites users visit in addition to Instagram, device identifiers that show when users are logging in through computers or mobile devices, and content metadata like hashtags and comments." This is a direct quote from Instagram's [privacy policy](#).

Continuing from the above; your whereabouts; outfit; name; online status and which device you are using are all known to Instagram. I don't know about you, but that has made and shall always make me uncomfortable.

You might be interested to know that public accounts, unless in possession of copyright, do not have possession of any of their photos. Anybody can take and use them for any purpose. One could use your content to promote their business by paying Instagram but not compensating you. I used to put a lot of effort taking beautiful photos and researching the object of my camera. Writing witty captions was a great joy of mine. Knowing that after all my exertion, someone could just pinch them and use them for themselves makes my blood boil.

The standard example I have used throughout discussing privacy concerns is that of the partygoer posting a picture during or shortly after the event. But this analysis is equally valid for all kinds of posts. Especially when considering the privacy concerns surrounding use of the app in general.

Remember, when you link your Instagram to other social media apps, all the information across those apps becomes available to Instagram.

Realising that I deemed my privacy less important than my hollow desire for instant gratification in the form of likes and comments was eye opening. I'd forsaken my enjoyment of events and, potentially, my safety at said events for nothing.

That is the third reason I removed myself from Instagram.

Conclusion

In summation, we have seen how devastating Instagram can be to our valuation of events; self-worth and privacy.

I won't reiterate what I have written. It is explained fully enough above. If you have got this far, I commend you. This article isn't crafted with a view to criticize. Writing this has been cathartic. I hope that it has opened the reader's eyes to the risks of Instagram.

Hope is not lost. When one names a demon, it loses its strength. I implore you to look deep within and find the true motivation behind your own use of social media. What have you got to lose?