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Sociology 250-Digital Immersion

Being 'required' to surf social media and engage on digital platforms was an interesting challenge. While I am a user of many social channels and certainly the internet, it was more difficult than I thought to dedicate 3-5 hours to remaining plugged in for the purposes of gathering data and being aware of what you are doing and what is going on around you. To be most effective and to get the broadest experience, I engaged with multiple digital mediums. I participated in some gaming activities and checked out trends, friends, peers and family on social media. This immersion prompted me to dive deeper into certain digital channels and to attempt others for the first time. This experience gave me a clearer perspective on how I, and others, engage with digital culture and helped me further my understanding on my relationship with varying platforms/mediums.

The first platform that I surfed was Instagram. While on Instagram, I took a more passive role-I scrolled through my feed to see what others were posting and commenting, and I peeked at other's stories but did not pro-actively post, like or otherwise engage in an interactive way that was visible to other users. I also used the platform to find products that I may be interested in purchasing. I found myself paying particular attention to the photo comments and the photos that were liked and posted by the people I follow. I also spent time looking at what was trending from various celebrities and those with a large number of followers (those with a more influential presence on the platform). One thing I noticed was that while looking at different posts on Instagram, I would get lost in something that felt like a hole. I would end up on a random photo or account so far from what I originally pressed on, that I didn't even remember how I got there

in the first place. Overall, I would say the things that resonated most with me and that I gravitated towards were the posts/comments that triggered my emotions, such as humorous images. I saw a photo of a dog licking a lollipop, and this made me happy because I enjoy anything related to dogs and pets and it got me to laugh. I also showed this image to my family members, thereby expanding the content and the user base to an audience who either did not have Instagram or had not yet seen the post.

In addition to Instagram, I went on another social media site, Facebook. My Facebook experience was similar to Instagram because I scrolled through lots of posts. However, on Facebook, I was more of an active user in that I liked several posts. I went on Facebook across several days and noticed that I tended to like and share similar types of posts or content that the same people posted at different times. I found my Facebook experience was much more interactive, as I received videos or photos that were shared by people I know or in which I was tagged, and I actively shared videos and photos with others. I left a visible trail that allowed others to know I had been on the platform. Facebook was fairly easy to use, and I realized that I have a method and routine that I follow when I scroll. For example, I only scroll down a certain amount before I stop and move out of the site. I have trained myself to stop for certain types of posts and to quickly scroll past others. From what I saw while online, I assume that others use Facebook in a similar way, as what I liked and spent more time looking at tended to have more likes, comments and shares than things I scrolled past. In addition, I had much more of a give-and-take sharing experience with my 'friends.' My friends and other users were actively liking and sharing, and I was doing the same.

While viewing both Facebook and Instagram, I was able to multi-task, and with only a moderate amount of attention, I was able to get through the posts while watching television,

having a conversation or playing with my dog. I also noticed that most posts which were uploaded on both of these platforms were done by females. Both males and females liked posts, but most of the content I viewed was posted by females. I thought about why this could be, and I came up with a number of reasons including: I am friends with more females, my typical likes are items that girls may find more interesting than boys, or because females tend to spend more time posting content on social media sites.

To complete this assignment, I also wanted to try something new, so I ventured into the gaming platform Fortnite. Here, I had no idea who I was gaming with as opposed to my regular social media channels where I knew and had chosen to ‘accept’ my friends and followers. While using Fortnite, I faced a significant learning curve to understand the experience, how to play the game and how people connect with one another. At first, not knowing what I was doing was a very unsettling feeling, because on all the other platforms I am aware of my surroundings. As I got more comfortable with the rules of the game and how to control the avatar, I realized what a frenzied feeling was created while I was trying to attack other people’s avatars and while others were trying to attack me. Fortnite triggered a much more heightened emotional and physical reaction than Instagram or Facebook and knowing I was being chased and that others could potentially be watching my avatar’s movements without me knowing made me anxious and hyper-focused on how I was manipulating the figure. I had to pay much closer attention than when I was casually cruising through social media. It seemed like everyone playing Fortnite had a similar mindset of advancing and killing other avatars. This common purpose was not evident on the social media sites I visited, where people were interacting or surveying others with much less urgency and users had different reasons for being on the platforms, as shown in the variety of posts, likes and comments.

After my Fortnite experience, I wanted to go back to a gaming platform that I was familiar with, Webkinz. Although it had been a long time since I had played in this online world of digital pets, I found that it still offered an interactive gaming experience, where I was able to communicate, trade items or compete against other users. Others were doing similar activities to me--some playing games, some communicating with others, some eating and a variety of other things. I found myself doing activities within the Webkinz online world which I also find enjoyable offline. There was a sense of satisfaction I felt while building and decorating the pet rooms and building my online 'house.' I also took care of the virtual pets and fed and tended to their health needs, which was a good imitation of the real steps in caring for a live animal.

Taking this deeper dive into my social media and digital behaviors on other mediums demonstrated to me that my social identity varies across these platforms and does play a role in how I interact on these different sites. I also realized that I don't have a clear social identity on certain channels, such as gaming sites, since none of my friends or family members are currently involved on these platforms (Fortnite and Webkinz). The various social groups I belong to use different social media platforms and, as a result, I found that my social identity varied depending on the media. My social identity on Instagram showed how I relate to my peers and how I present myself and my interests, e.g. travel, shopping, music and sports, to my friend groups. With my peers, I tend to be quieter and more laid back and less likely to share personal information. On this channel, I realized that what came up on my feed and what I chose to like/post was more cultural, timely, and related to pop culture activities, as this is the identity I have on this platform. On the contrary, my Facebook social identity is centered around my 'friends,' which are primarily my immediate and extended family members or longtime friends, many of whom do not have an Instagram account. Since Facebook is my primary source of

ongoing connection with a more defined social group, my profile or identity is a bit more personal. In my more personal groups, I identify as having a greater impact and see myself as an important part of these groups. I am expected to, and more likely to, share events, accomplishments, or special experiences as opposed to Instagram, where I keep the posting, liking and commenting less personal and less frequent because it can be viewed by a broader group of followers, many of whom are not normally in my immediate social groups. On Instagram, my contributions are not as important to other individuals as they are on my Facebook page.

My social identities on the gaming sites were each a unique experience. I tried Fortnite for the first time to experience that cultural phenomenon. Since I had never participated in the game before and no one in any of my social groups participate in Fortnite, I did not have a clear or defined social identity and could enjoy complete anonymity and create the image of how I wanted to be perceived. This was beneficial since I had no idea how to navigate the game. I felt that if I was a regular user, I would have a specific social group and a social and gaming strategy which would have created my social identity and set certain expectations for me. Since Fortnite in no way appeals to my social or cultural interests, I will not be likely to return to the game and therefore will continue to have no social identity in that forum. The Webkinz platform was different because my sister and I collected Webkinz stuffed animals and had created accounts when we were younger. Since I remembered my login, I visited the site to see how my social identity has changed over time. On this site, I used to play with many friends and family members. Since they no longer use the platform, my social identity wasn't known, and I could be anonymous as I communicated with other 'pet owners' without anyone learning about the real me. The fact that all site transactions are carried out through your stuffed animals, makes it next

to impossible to maintain any true social identity when communicating with unknown users. This was advantageous when I was young because it limited the access that internet predators had to data that could identify me as a young user. I realize this now that I have a better understanding of how surveillance occurs every time we use social media and gaming platforms, and how much of my personal and social identity is captured when I participate in these sites.

This concept of surveillance and the collection of data about our social identity has implications beyond our day-to-day use of social media and gaming platforms for communication, connectivity and leisure purposes. My experience with this assignment helped solidify whether I have a dystopian or utopian view when analyzing social media. I found that I have a more dystopian perspective as it relates to social media and gaming. One dystopian idea is that all of our search results reinforce things we like and have viewed. Once we have established preferences through repetitive queries, the internet search engines can parcel out specific content that is related to our interests and create our own personal filter bubble (Lindgren 2017:56). While this may be beneficial in maximizing our use of the internet, it is also an invasion of our privacy. Also, in line with a dystopian view on the internet and digital society, these filter bubbles limit our exposure to information that may give us different perspectives on certain topics. As an example, my previous likes and searches for specific items or trends on Instagram resulted in pop-up advertisements for those of similar products when I was on Facebook. Instead of getting ads or being exposed to things I could potentially be interested in seeing or learning about, I was fed things that I would want to see, therefore limiting my potential to use the vast amount of available web content to my advantage.

I do consider a utopian perspective as it relates to the internet and social media providing broader access to the world. For example, I would not be in contact with many individuals were

it not for social media. I would also not have access to such a broad base of information or participate so freely if I were not using the internet to gain knowledge on certain topics (Lindgren 2017:56). Whether you are a passive or active user, the internet and social media open up connections that did not exist before our digital world. It is up to us to take advantage of these connections. Another utopian idea that I witnessed while engaging in this assignment was Pierre Lévy's idea of collective intelligence (Lindgren 2017:58), or that "no one knows everything, but everyone knows something" (Lindgren 2017:58). As an example of how sharing information creates a more informed society, in one of the Facebook groups that I belong to, someone asked a question about where residents could buy brick oven pizza now that a local establishment had changed its menu. Within minutes, a host of suggestions appeared with feedback on other restaurants, type of pizzas to choose, various crusts and more. Many individuals posted their own recommendations, while others built on previous posts, either reinforcing what had been said or adding their opinions. Everyone's participation helped to collectively benefit the consumers in this group by adding things one individual may not have thought of on their own. While this was not a life altering issue, the collective sharing of information provided everyone who saw that post with ideas and insight on where to find a favorite product. I have seen the same behavior occur whenever someone asks for recommendations.

The internet and social media allow people to participate in a larger forum and to speak their minds in a somewhat anonymous environment. My experience reflected both the utopian and dystopian views on online anonymity. This anonymity can be a positive factor, as the utopian view of newer technology emphasizes, since it enables people to be involved in a dialogue they would not have joined had they been required to share their identity (Lindgren 2017:56). This is also explained through what Suler called an online disinhibition effect

(Lindgren 2017:76). This effect doesn't just have to take place in the form of words but can be seen in actions as well. For example, when I was on Webkinz in a room with multiple users, like a chat room, I was sending friendly greetings to the other users because no one would or could judge me since they didn't know who I was. I felt comfortable casually saying hello to all other users when they didn't know the face behind the screen. I would not necessarily have done this on a social media site where people could see what I had posted because I would have been self-conscious. The dystopian view is that many anonymous communication channels are unsupervised. This allows for the elimination of courtesy filters that people would use if they were engaged in face-to-face communication (Lindgren 2017:56). This abuse of anonymity doesn't have to be in the form of words, but actions as well. Continuing with my experience on Webkinz, I witnessed some 'pets' leave a conversation with others or occasionally use a response that could be interpreted negatively. The anonymity these pets have enables the user to act in this way. Many sites that allow for users to have anonymity can perpetuate extreme opinions where people may cross the line between being honest and being inappropriate/rude.

Continuing to think about what kinds of things people post and like, I realize that posting and reacting to extreme opinions is not something that is part of my social identity. I am fairly reserved in the comments and photos that I post and react to/like on social media. During this immersion, I came across posts that I did not necessarily care to like, but if a large portion of my social groups had liked the post, I clicked on 'like' so that I would fit into the norm of what was acceptable or expected of me. I was able to see how Durkheim's idea of social facts (Lindgren 2017:32) relates to how I use digital media and that my behavior is often influenced by those in my various groups. While I was using personal agency and exercising my own free will to like posts, videos, etc., there was a clear social structure, as I felt that my actions were influenced by

my online peer group. My experience also displayed aspects of self-presentation such as Goffman's idea of the front stage and backstage (Lindgren 2017:38). When I was positing comments on Facebook, I would draft a comment, edit it a few times and review it before I hit post to make sure I was presenting myself in a way that was consistent with how I want to be perceived on my front stage. I found that most people portray themselves in a way that is filtered. Many photos I saw had been edited with a filter, which is done on the backstage. In addition, few people posted unhappy content and chose instead to update their profiles and posts with smiling faces that were engaged in fun social encounters. Our digital culture enables users to create an image of themselves that will always appear positive to others. I see this as a downside of our digital world and an aspect that enables our connection with others to be less authentic.

On the social media platforms, I also found that I did not rush to reply to a post. I considered whether to comment and what to post. My reaction was asynchronous (Lindgren 2017:74), or not instantaneous. This gave me a chance to craft what I said so it reflected my opinion and personality and let me manage my identity and how I present myself (Miller et al. 2016:191). This asynchronous aspect of social media platforms also allowed me to decide if I wanted to like a post I was tagged in or not and for others to do the same with content that I posted or shared. On the gaming sites, particularly Fortnite, a lot of what I was doing required me to react in real time, so I didn't have a chance to think about how I wanted to respond.

My immersion experience was a mix of continuing my regular digital practices while also venturing into new forms of digital media. I found it interesting to use these platforms with the heightened awareness of paying attention to how and why I was using the sites. Since I was collecting notes and observations of my usage, I was more conscious of the decisions and behaviors I exhibited online. It was interesting to see how multiple sociological theories played

out both within the sites I visited and to my identity and behavior within these sites. I was surprised to see that I actually have a digital/social routine that I follow and certain types of content that I gravitate towards online, for example, anything related to fashion, entertainment, pets or travel. My 'likes' and things I chose to follow fell into fairly predictable categories and my social identities accurately depicted my real-life personality within specific social groups. Overall, my participation on social media and various gaming platforms made me happy but it was a temporary or "fleeting" (Miller et al. 2016:200) emotion, which dissipated once I got back to the activities of my day or scrolled to a new post, video or comment. The internet, social media and gaming platforms are incredibly powerful since people can use them to post anything from updates about their family, travel experiences, professional accomplishments, political opinions or simply to share a current event or news story. I think my digital involvement will continue to be a mix of being an active and passive user and I will maintain my digital footprint primarily for connectivity to others and for information gathering.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Works Cited

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