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MEANINGLESS SCROLLING

THE EXISTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT CONSUMPTION

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Introduction

In 2020, several articles came to my attention linking extensive social media use to neurological conditions such as anxiety and depression. Upon reviewing some of the psychological literature on the matter, I found numerous studies supporting the claims that I had both read online and heard from peers.¹ Yet, while the connection between social media use and these conditions was corroborated across a number of studies, the mechanisms by which social media operated at the root of the problems remained largely unexplored.

It was not until sometime passed that I came across the work of Viktor Frankl, which enlightened me to the significance of meaning in one's life and the idea of 'Logotherapy,' a psychiatric and philosophical therapeutic approach grounded in orientation towards meaning. I found in Frankl's writing a potential factor in the problematic of excessive social media use—a disruption in the formation and experience of meaning via our engagement with the social media platform.²

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which social media operates to deny, disrupt, and distort our individual relation to the pursuit and experience of meaning. Through the work of William James and Viktor Frankl, I delineate meaning as a concept and the methods by which we attain meaning in our lives. After grounding meaning in the thinking of the aforementioned thinkers, I turn to the structure of social media and the way in which we relate to the realm of digital media consumption to offer an explanation for the psychological harms that have been

¹ Sampasa-Kanyinga, Hugues, and Rosamund F Lewis. "Frequent Use of Social Networking Sites Is Associated with Poor Psychological Functioning Among Children and Adolescents." See also; Tsitsika, Artemis K et al. "Online social networking in adolescence: patterns of use in six European countries and links with psychosocial functioning." and; Yan, Hanyi, Rui Zhang, Theresa M. Oniffrey, Guoxun Chen, Yueqiao Wang, Yingru Wu, Xinge Zhang, Quan Wang, Lu Ma, Rui Li, and Justin B. Moore. "Associations among Screen Time and Unhealthy Behaviors, Academic Performance, and Well-Being in Chinese Adolescents"

² Undoubtedly, Frankl was not considering social media in his work but it was within the pages of *Man's Search for Meaning* that an explanation for the neurological harms of social media use became apparent to me.

associated with excessive use of social media. By instantiating the structure of social media in Theodor Adorno's work on the culture industry and free time, I elucidate the mechanisms by which excessive content consumption on social media detracts the possibility of pursuing and experiencing meaning in our lives.

I. Defining 'Meaning'

Defining the term 'meaning' is by no means straightforward. Yet, when we ask people what meaning is to them, they do tend to provide an answer. This is exactly the kind of meaning I shall be concerned with in this exploration, not a universalistic meaning to life, but the personal meaning that we all experience and have some sense of (even if we may not be able to define it with complete precision). Meaning is not some end to which we attain and once procured hold onto indefinitely. Rather, meaning arises out of the actions, orientations, and directions we express through our embodied presence in the world. Action and presence in the world are not sufficient to experience meaning, however. There must be some aim, some 'ideal,' towards which our actions, our being-at-work,³ progress from one moment to the next.

In *What Makes a Life Significant*, James states: "The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains—And, whatever or wherever life may be, there will always be the chance for that marriage to take place."⁴ It is the space in which ideal meets action that one's life becomes significant.⁵ Fidelity, courage, and endurance are all character traits expressed and realized through the way in which we operate in the world. But, if action alone is not sufficient for the formation of meaning in one's life, then neither is a purely

³ To use an Aristotelian term.

⁴ William James, *What Makes a Life Significant*, 20.

⁵ This is not in the normative sense of delineating one life to be more significant than another, but in the very personal felt experience of a life lived significantly.

intellectual comprehension of one's ideals. We might have a conception of the kind of life that would yield some sense of significance within us, but if we do not bring that ideal to fruition in action, if we do not marry the conceptual ideal with the way in which we operate in the world, then the experience of meaning, which is ultimately meaning itself, will continue to elude us.

Now, it is worth exploring precisely what is meant by an 'ideal.' In James' thinking there are two primary components of ideals, which he recounts as follows:

An ideal...must be something intellectually conceived, something of which we are not unconscious, if we have it; and it must carry with it that sort of outlook, uplift, and brightness that go with all intellectual facts. Secondly, there must be novelty in an ideal—novelty at least for him whom the ideal grasps.⁶

Firstly, ideals are those conceptions of which we are consciously aware that bring about the potentiality of positive experience through our conception of them. Though, as was mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the ideal in itself cannot bring about a meaningful life,⁷ ideals represent the intellectual space in which our lives are oriented towards significance. Secondly, ideals must be novel, in that they are not merely concerned with existing routine. Of course, this is particular to the individual. For example, while skydiving is a novel thought for someone who has never experienced it, for a skydiving instructor it is part of their day-to-day life.⁸ Thus, we might think of ideals as our aspirations towards new and fulfilling pursuits, which provide the grounds for meaning as we embark on the process of attaining them.

Not only is meaning a universally experienced, and experienceable, phenomena, but a fundamental element of the human experience. As Frankl writes in *Man's Search for Meaning*:

⁶ William James, *What Makes a Life Significant*, 16.

⁷ The ideal must be realized through action.

⁸ And the experienced skydiver will seek out ever more audacious aerobatics and locations to dive in the pursuit of novelty.

Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own *will* to meaning.⁹

For Frankl, our pursuit of meaning is *the* fundamental driving force of human existence. Like James, Frankl speaks of striving for significance in one's life and recounts a very personalized sense of the pursuit, yet the act of pursuing itself is shared universally. Though each of us may search for meaning and arrive at a very different conception of what that is in our lives, what we share is the primacy with which we are driven towards meaning in whatever particular way that may manifest in our lives.

I mentioned earlier that meaning is not something obtained and held onto with permanence but is rather continually experienced as we partake in actions which bring us closer to, or in accordance with, some cognized ideal. Why the pursuit of certain ideals yields the experience of meaning, whereas pursuing the ideals of another person may bring no feeling of meaning whatsoever, is somewhat of a mystery. Yet, what remains critical in the search for and experience of meaning is a sense of forward motion towards that which is meaningful. James describes this experience as such: "The thing of deepest—or, at any rate, of comparatively deepest—significance in life does seem to be its character of progress, or that strange union of reality with ideal novelty which it continues from one moment to another to present."¹⁰ The transient nature of our experience, in turn, makes the living of a significant life transient also. Thus, meaning is ever slipping from our grasp as we continually pursue it. Yet, it is precisely the impermanence of the experience that demarcates the possibility of meaning itself. If meaning were so easily obtained,

⁹ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 99.

¹⁰ William James, *What Makes a Life Significant*, 17.

if we could reach out and clutch it with abandon, hold onto its sense in perpetuity, much like indulgence in anything, meaning would soon come to mean nothing at all. So, as James suggests, we must progress towards our ideals, and bring them into reality through our actions in the world.

II. The Significance of Meaning

Though the importance of meaning may seem self-evident, it is worth considering why we ought to be concerned with the presence of meaning in our lives. It has been well documented that presence of meaning in life has a positive association with individual well-being. That is to say, there is a significant relationship between well-being and the experience of one's life as meaningful.¹¹ In fact, we find in Frankl's work the suggestion that a doctor may often interpret the existential distress of a patient as a symptom of mental disease, prompting them to "bury [their] patient's existential despair under a heap of tranquilizing drugs," when the root of their problems lies in the existential crisis itself.¹² Thus, Frankl forwards that the approach to an individual's well-being ought to be through existential guidance—orientation towards meaning.¹³

Undoubtedly, there is something universal about the experience of meaning yet meaning is always at the same time particular to the individual. In this regard, we might consider the word 'meaning' at a morphological level. Meaning is a gerund, a verb functioning as a noun. Much like running or jumping, meaning is an active condition actualized through an individual and thus we ought to consider, much like Frankl and James, its instantiation within the particular (i.e., within each of us). To this end the personalized interpretation of meaning that I have discussed in the

¹¹ Li, JB., Dou, K. & Liang, Y. The Relationship Between Presence of Meaning, Search for Meaning, and Subjective Well-Being. 22, 467–489. See also; Fischer, Ian C., Ekin Secinti, Zeynep Cemalcilar, and Kevin L. Rand. "Examining Cross-Cultural Relationships between Meaning in Life and Psychological Well-Being in Turkey and the United States." 22, no. 3 (2020): 1341–58, to name a few studies on the topic.

¹² Though he makes no claim that this is true of all cases of neurological distress.

¹³ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 102-103. In our contemporary times the pharmaceutical business has grown to immeasurable proportions. Considering the indictments of many large pharmaceutical companies in the opioid crisis of our time, we might be inclined to see more clearly the wisdom in Frankl's words.

opening sections of this paper, and not some objective sense of meaning that exists external to us, shall form the basis of my exploration into the relationship between social media use and the presence, formation, and experience of meaning in our lives.

III. A Conceptual Exploration of Social Media

The term ‘social media’ describes an ever-growing set of digital platforms on which users share and browse content, communicate, and network, to name but a few functions of this virtual space. Corporations like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are among the most widely recognized social media outlets, which as of 2021 saw use from some 72% of adults in the United States, following a trend of sharply increasing usage since this data was first collated in 2005.¹⁴ To say that social media is a societally defining force at this point is by no means an understatement. We need look no further than the furor surrounding the 2016 election interference scandal to understand the prevalence that social media has attained regarding our lives in the present-day United States (and far beyond).¹⁵

It’s worth noting that social media corporations are continually expanding the purview of their functionality, with platforms like Facebook adding its “Marketplace” for trading goods online in 2016, Instagram introducing a live stream feature that same year, and Snapchat presently rolling out a “Dynamic Stories” project through which news broadcasters present breaking stories via automatic upload to the application from their various online publications. In short, the definition of social media is ever changing and continues to encompass a greater variety of facets, and in turn holds greater sway over the lives of social media users.

¹⁴ “Social Media Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center.

¹⁵ Abrams, Abigail, “Here's What We Know So Far about Russia's 2016 Meddling.”

Questions of philosophical import within the world of social media are as boundless as the platforms themselves, and for this reason my inquiry in this paper could not hope to encapsulate social media in its entirety. What I shall attempt to achieve is an exploration into one of the key features that these platforms have to offer: content consumption. Each of the platforms referenced in the opening of this section, and many others for that matter, provide to their users some form of digital space in which content can be viewed—images, videos, memes, news stories, etc.—across their various websites and downloadable applications. While the format of these spaces for content consumption differs somewhat across platforms, their essential function is to engage the user with content to keep them returning to that space.

Let us take up one such platform in order to better understand the phenomenon of content consumption on social media. When visiting the landing page of Facebook's website, or upon opening the mobile application, one is greeted immediately by a stream of content in the form of a Facebook feed. I use 'a' and not 'the' here as Facebook feeds are particular to the individual's account and to the specific time of accessing said feed. A feed itself is a vertical stream of content, which can be expanded by scrolling down the page with a touchpad or finger. Pictures, status updates, news stories, and a plethora of other forms of media appear on these feeds as posts, which have various levels of interactability from reacting with a 'like' or comment to being linked to another webpage for further exploration.

In order that one's feed is always teeming with fresh media a piece of software, namely an algorithm, measures the interaction of users with content on their feed (from the amount of time spent watching a video to the kind of content graced with the like button), which is then interpreted by the software and used to direct similar content to the user in the future. The goal of the algorithm (or better said, its creators) is to curate the kind of media that keeps us present on the platform. For

this reason, there isn't a universal shared experience of social media, but rather each person's experience of social media is specific to their own interaction with the platform.

Though defined as a 'social' space, and in many ways these platforms are just that, social media is unlike other loci of socialization in that they do not present a common environment of interaction, unlike, say, a parade or bar in which the socializers all find themselves in a shared space. Social media platforms operate as a mediator between ourselves and the world with which we wish to interact, determining that which is presented to us and intending to hold our attention for as long as possible.

Each social media organization offers some variation on the manner in which they provide content to the consumer but follow the same approach at large: engage users and retain their engagement. It is this specific facet of the social media experience, the world of digital content consumption, that forms the core of my concerns here. With the virtual world constituting an ever-greater proportion of people's daily lives, in what ways does social media impact our lived experiences? What might be the existential implications of our relationship to this contemporary mediator of experience?

IV. Activity and Passivity in the Social Media Space

Both Frankl and James consider meaning formation to be an *active* pursuit. For Frankl, meaning must be searched out. Even in the face of suffering we can live meaningfully by reconfiguring the conceptual framework through which we relate to said suffering. He writes, "Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice."¹⁶ Though suffering is so often an emotion that leads to despair and rejection of the potentiality of individual meaning, if it is possible to recast our suffering in light of some greater

¹⁶ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 113.

significance, we can live meaningful lives even through such a burden. This reconfiguration is by no means a passive pursuit, we cannot sit back and allow the meaning of our suffering to unfold before us. Rather, meaning in suffering must be sought out. We must actively approach our suffering and find within it some significance that transcends the immediacy of its emotional turmoil.¹⁷

Activity is similarly present in James' notion of living a significant life.¹⁸ The purpose of the ideal, which presupposes significance in James' work, cannot merely be an intellectual pursuit. As explored in Section I, for James we must 'marry' our ideals with action. An ideal without real manifestation in action does not yield a significant life. Neither will action divorced from some higher ideal bring forth significance to the individual. Where the ideal meets actualized activity is the space in which meaning forms. Thus, meaning is not reducible to an active pursuit, but activity is a necessary condition out of which meaning can arise. The interruption of this ideal-action relation, then, represents a barrier between ourselves and the realization of meaning in our lives.

The active motion in meaning formation comes into conflict with the way in which social media engages the user. Social media platforms are designed, algorithmically, to deliver content to the user for consumption. As we scroll through TikTok feeds, Instagram reels, and Facebook posts, these platforms continually gather information on our habits in order to deliver a constant stream of attention-retaining content. Though we may swipe our thumb up and down the screen to gleam through images, memes, and posts, ultimately this is the extent of our active engagement. We become passive, consumptive, participants of the social media world.

¹⁷ It is worth noting here that Frankl does not apply this pursuit of meaning in suffering universally. There are unnecessary sufferings that lack a deeper significance, and in which we cannot find meaning.

¹⁸ For all intents and purposes, 'significant' can be taken as synonymous with 'meaningful.'

Passivity is the very antithesis of that active form of lifestyle that James identifies as so integral to the experience of meaning in one's life. We cannot achieve significance in our lives if, as James suggests, there is: "no courage shown, no privations undergone, no dirt or scars contracted in the attempt to get them [our ideals] realized."¹⁹ Yet, this is exactly the aptitude towards which social media drives us. We become accustomed to passively receiving reality through the medium of our devices. When we're engaged in life solely through the consumption of content, we are not occupying the grounds upon which we might meet our ideals with action. The desire of the individual to toil and work for an ideal is diminished by this acclimatization to passivity. If entertainment is served on a silver platter, and we become so accustomed to the fine dining of social media life, the metaphorical pitchfork required to unearth one's ideals and the significant aspects of one's life becomes ever more unwieldy.

When reading responses to viral posts, one will often find the word 'relatable' strewn throughout the comments section. Content that 'blows up' on social media is often that which resonates with the largest number of people. But consider for a moment what exactly it means for something to be relatable. Relatability infers that which is known to an individual. Though the content delivered to us by digital platforms may express an emotion/idea/thought in a novel way, ultimately, it is relatable because it reflects something that is already known on some level to the content consumer. Simply consuming the known is not an active process, rather it is a passive absorption. Of course, the known can be reinterpreted or re-cognized in a novel way, but the creative work of expressing the known under a new light falls on the part of the content creator, not its consumer.

¹⁹ James, *What Makes a Life Significant*, 17.

As social media platforms acclimate the user to immediate gratification, we begin to outsource our own lived experiences to the lives of others—at least those lives as they are distortedly presented in the digital space. Writing on the ‘cultural industry,’²⁰ Adorno recognized this outsourcing of lived experiences in his essay of the same name:

In so far as the culture industry arouses a feeling of well-being that the world is precisely in that order suggested by the culture industry, the substitute gratification which it prepares for human beings cheats them out of the same happiness which it deceitfully projects.²¹

While Adorno is writing of a more centralized, top-down,²² system cheating us out of that which it presents to the consumer (namely, some sort of idyllic, interesting, or fantasy life), social media platforms function in a similar manner. The projected experiences are in some ways decentralized, in as much as content does not come from any single creator, while such content simultaneously reaches the user through the centralized function of the algorithm. The important note of convergence here, however, is that of ‘[deceitful] projections.’

Our social media feeds bring the best (and most exaggerated) aspects of the lives of those we follow to the forefront of our attention. Habituation towards passivity has already been discussed, but it’s worth considering Adorno’s work to better understand how this process operates. Social media posts, especially those which make it to our feeds, are generally highly cultivated and deliberately presented in such a way as to elicit the most positive or reactionary responses.²³ In this sense, the way in which celebrities, peers, and even strangers are presented through our devices is deeply distorted. The kind of lives we envy do not exist in reality (or perhaps

²⁰ In this context referring to the world of radio, television, and mass media.

²¹ Adorno, *The Culture Industry Revisited*, 106.

²² “The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above”.

²³ We might add the word ‘divisive’ to this description in light of the recent scandal around Facebook (now Meta) in which the platform’s algorithm promoted the most divisive content as these types of posts garnered the greatest amount of user engagement. See the *Wall Street Journal*’s report on the Subject: “Facebook Executives Shut down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive.”

better put: in the non-digital space). We wish for the lavish, interesting, and adventurous lives that appear to be part of so many others' existence, but these cherry-picked moments that are shared via social media rarely reflect the genuine nature of the lives they proclaim to project.

It remains to be seen, however, what problematic may be associated with such a projection. Recall the emphasis that both James and Frankl placed on growth as it relates to meaning formation. The way in which social media orients individuals to compare themselves to others poses an interruption to the sense of growth that both Frankl and James identify as crucial to living a meaningful life. Multiple studies concerned with the way in which individuals compare themselves to others via social media platforms have found that increased social media use corresponded to an increase in symptoms of depression.²⁴ Undoubtedly, comparing oneself to others is by no means a social media specific phenomena, but the ease with which one is exposed to the lives of others (or at least the distorted avatars of those lives) in the social media space is an unprecedented anomaly of our time.

James describes the 'character of progress' in life as profoundly impactful on one's sense of significance. But the progression of our lives is always relative to ourselves as we navigate some path forward. If we are concerned with measuring ourselves by the yardstick set by those we see on social media, our ability to experience personal growth is diminished. For we are comparing ourselves to 'selves' that are mere deceitful projections. As social media engagement draws our lives ever more into passive experience, we consume greater and greater volumes of these supposed other lives, and our inclination for comparing ourselves to others is strengthened.²⁵ Yet, when comparing ourselves to others reaches such a degree as to induce depression and other

²⁴ See Bennett, Brooke L et al. "Examining the impact of social media on mood and body dissatisfaction using ecological momentary assessment." *J of ACH* vol. 68,5 (2020).

²⁵ To damaging effect as the psychological literature would suggest.

neurotic maladies, the relationship we have with ourselves becomes mediated not by the barometer of our own progress, but by a relation to the facetious lives of others.²⁶

To speak of the toll that depression takes on the individual in their ability to engage in active pursuits may be sufficient to reflect the way in which social media's promotion of unhealthy comparison impacts our ability to experience meaning. But beyond this, the growth that James describes as fundamental to leading a meaningful life is inherently self-referential. That is, we must, through activity, pursue a life in which we grow towards some personal ideal. If our notion of comparison is so caught up in our deficiencies as relative to virtual others, then our capacity to recognize the essential growth into meaning within ourselves, or even the trajectory towards growth we might trace, slips further and further from our purview.

In recognizing the manifestation of deceitful projections in the social media space and how our relationship to these projections impacts our ability to experience and recognize personal growth, one can see how the transition into passive experience prompted by these platforms disrupts the very relationality required for meaning. If we are to agree with Frankl and James and instantiate meaning in activity, then there is real cause for concern for the existential well-being of a generation whose lives are shifting ever deeper into the passivity of digital space.

V. The Temporal Aspect of Meaning

The experience of meaning, like all experiences, occurs in time and over a given period of it. Though we may never precisely measure when a moment of meaning begins and ends, meaning occupies our conscious state as a temporality. It is not necessary for us to constantly exist in a state that we would describe as meaningful. Of course, we eat, sleep, and engage in

²⁶ Comparing ourselves to others should not be construed as intrinsically negative. We have the capacity to compare ourselves to others for a reason. Consider all the people that have been inspired by an idol to improve themselves and their lives. But, as with most things, excess in this regard (which I argue is promoted by the way in which social media platforms engage the user) can, and does, lead to detrimental effects.

many other practices essential for life, but to which we would not ascribe deeply meaningful connotations. Thus, it is possible to lead a life that we might ourselves describe as meaningful even if each moment is not teeming with that sense of significance that rouses us to describe our lives as such. Yet, a life devoid of those moments that spark a sense of transcending the mundane, of contributing something beyond oneself, of experiencing something further than the satisfaction of bodily pleasures, of moments we ultimately deem meaningful, would hardly be self-proclaimed as one of meaning—save as a rhetorical device to present oneself to others in a more favorable light. In order for us to live meaningfully, we must leave open the space for those moments of meaning to occur.

Frankl acknowledges the importance of this temporality. He writes: “What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment.”²⁷ Frankl offers us a reminder that just because one has lived a life in which many moments were meaningful, that meaning can and does allude us if there is no space for meaning within the moment. This is exactly why those who have achieved so much, conquered unimaginable feats, and lived a life that so many would envy, are still prone to the existential troubles that so pervade the human experience at large. This is why we see in Frankl the primacy of “man’s search for meaning.” For if meaning is not being actively sought, the moment of meaning becomes an impossibility.

VI. The Virtual World and Lost Time

Returning to the question of our relationship with social media, the way in which we make use of our limited existence takes on renewed perspective when we consider the mortality of meaning. The term ‘mortality of meaning’ might sound somewhat stark, but I think a

²⁷ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 108.

reframing of our relationship to meaning is often an aid towards achieving it. When we pause to think that meaning is really what makes our lives worth living,²⁸ and that personal meaning passes from existence when we do, the importance of orienting our lives towards meaning rises ever higher in our priorities. Yet, we are at present in the face of a globally defining force which serves to rift us ever further from the pursuits that uplift our lives into meaning—our desire to consume the content of the online world.

As time spent in virtual space constitutes a greater proportion of our waking hours,²⁹ our temporal experience transfigures into a chase for immediate reward and serves to distance us from the pursuit of fulfilling that which is ultimately meaningful to us. While we can use social media and simultaneously hold ideals that make our lives meaningful,³⁰ when one's use of social media begins to impede on the time one would otherwise make use of to seek out the meaningful goals, relationships, and pursuits in one's life (much in the way that many addictions operate to take precedence over meaningful actions) one experiences fewer of the moment-to-moment manifestations of meaning of which Frankl speaks.

Perhaps it's worth exploring why consumptive time, that is time we spend consuming and, in this instance, referring to online content consumption, is not conducive to meaningful time. The role of consumption in our lives is multifaceted. Of course, we consume food and water in order to sustain ourselves, and many of us consume substances to elicit pleasure, focus, and other such bodily experiences (i.e., alcohol, caffeine, etc.). Yet, consumption under a capitalistic structure has become almost entirely self-referential. We consume for the sake of

²⁸ As opposed to, say, existence for simply the sake of existing.

²⁹ One billion collective hours of watchtime on YouTube alone are consumed every day.

³⁰ I don't believe Frankl is of the thought that we must constantly be striving towards meaningful pursuits, but that when we do experience meaning (which Frankl would argue is essential to human life) it is relative to the particular moment in question.

consumption. Corporations, through immense advertisement campaigns, have convinced us that if we upgrade to the latest smartphone, wear the hottest new line of clothing brands, purchase this year's most extravagant car, our lives will become immeasurably improved.

It would be no good, however, if we were satisfied with one-time purchases. In order that we continue to buy-into³¹ the profitable model of consumerism, there is always a newer phone on the horizon, a fresh line of clothing, and a flashier model of car each year. In this sense the pleasure derived from our consumerism is not to be found in our relation to the object of purchase, but rather in our relation to the act of purchasing, the act of consumption itself. It is upon this very model that social media platforms are based. If we open up one of our various social apps and find immediate contentment with the first piece of content we see, we would simply switch off, remove ourselves from the online space, and go back to our experience in the non-digital world.³² The goal of a platform such as Facebook³³ is to retain user attention for as long as possible. Much like the aforementioned corporations, the goal is to convince people to consume for the sake of consumption.

Why do I seek to distinguish social media platforms from the various other engagements that turn our experience into consumptive time? The limitless nature of consumptive time in the digital space sets it apart from other manifestations of consumption. There is no end to content online. For instance, if I were to begin scrolling through public posts on Instagram right now, my life would come to an end before I could exhaust the content uploaded to the platform even in the

³¹ Quite literally in fact.

³² It seems strange, even to me, to refer to what many might call the 'real world' as the non-digital world. But I think this phrasing reflects something deeper about our relation to the online sphere. As my work in this section suggests, more and more of our experience is mediated through our devices, so much so that to discount such experience as 'non-real' is to discount an ever more prominent aspect of experience itself.

³³ Now Meta. I use Facebook here as it is generally still the most widely recognized referent for a social media platform.

past 24 hours.³⁴ We do not ‘like’ everything we come across on our social feeds and when the entertainment stops that signals, for most, the time that one puts their phone down and moves on to another endeavor. But what is so particularly problematic regarding social media is that algorithms are intentionally designed such that the entertainment does not stop. Our information is continually gathered, and social media platforms are constantly learning what keeps us engaged, both individually and collectively at a demographic level.

Social media corporations have not uncovered some new fact of human consumption here—adapting to consumer habits and targeting demographic trends has long been in existence—but the introduction of artificial intelligence tracking our preferences, engagement, and screen time has fundamentally shifted the potentiality of consumptive time becoming an ever-present aspect of the human experience itself. There is immense financial gain to be had by orienting human action towards consumption for consumption's sake and social media platforms truly are at the forefront of directing our lives towards this end.

Thus far I have tracked the ways in which social media presents an imminent transition in the way that we spend our time.³⁵ But why is such a shift problematic? As I discussed earlier, there is an element of meaning inherently tied to individual growth and our perception of said growth. At base, growth is measured only insofar as we are consciously aware of ourselves now and ourselves at some point in the past. We acknowledge some ideal which we wish to make manifest and consider ourselves in relation to that ideal as time passes. Growth, then, is our relative position in time with reference to our ideals. If in the now we feel closer to the ideals that

³⁴ Though I’m sure my phone would die before then.

³⁵ Even the metaphor ‘spend our time’ reflects the way in which our experiences have become increasingly aligned with the practice of consumption itself. This phrase is not novel to our digital world, but the introduction of abbreviations like ‘OMG’ and ‘LOL,’ which originated in the online space, into every-day vernacular speaks to the integration of social media experience into our non-digital world. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s work *Metaphors We Live By* for a deeper exploration of the phenomenological account of metaphors.

ground our sense of meaning than we did at some point in our past, then we feel as though we have grown. Yet in order to experience ‘growing,’ which we might conceive of as the meaningful moment itself,³⁶ we must simultaneously project ourselves into the future and determine whether our current path is leading us towards our ideals.

Now, considering consumptive time in relation to growth, one begins to see the disruption of meaning formation that we face. As an entirely self-referential pursuit, i.e., consumption for consumption's sake, consumptive time affords no sense of growth to the individual. Social media platforms increasingly orient our experience towards the desire to consume content. We chase the rush of the next funny image or video, or morbidly read on about the tragedies facing our planet, and the platform, in some sense, takes notice of this, sending more and more similar content our way and deepening the rabbit hole of consumption before us. This transformation of experience into consumptive time in which the only delimiting factor is ourselves³⁷ and our capacity to remove ourselves from the space, a space designed inherently to resist our inclination to do so, denies our potentiality for growth. I am no closer to my ideals after scrolling through Facebook for an hour than I was when I started. Now of course, one hour in relation to my life is not an immense span of time, and I may have used such time for entertainment in any case. Yet, let us consider the significance of entertainment time for a moment.

There is little doubt that entertainment, down-time, and relaxation, are integral to one’s well-being, but that does not exclude such time from being meaningful-time. If I uphold the ideal that sharing moments with family and friends is ultimately meaningful, then when I share this time with the people that bring me towards this ideal, I can be both entertained and experiencing

³⁶ To relate Frankl and James here.

³⁷ Online content, as stated before, really is limitless in relation to our own temporal existence.

meaning. However, the type of social media use I am discussing is not of this kind. Though the term ‘social’ brings about the connotation of a community-based pursuit, when I am scrolling through a social feed I am removed from the outside world, alone in my relation to the content presented through my screen. One hour is not to be discounted offhandedly when it is spent on pure consumptive activity (It’s surprising how much can be achieved in one hour), but the real problem is the summation of these consumptive hours over time.³⁸

If we agree with James, that we need to grow in order to experience meaning in our lives, then we cannot become solely consumptive beings. I am not of the belief that every social media user has become purely as such, but the trends in screen time and the increasing number of hours spent on these platforms is a worrisome direction considering our need for growth and the anathema nature of consumptive time towards it. Undoubtedly, consumption can be an aspect of our lives without subsuming their entirety, but we must be aware that this process of consumptive time forming the basis of our day-to-day experience is not an instant switch. The allure of spending time on social media is a steady and stealthy process. What begins as 20 minutes a day soon becomes 40, and then an hour, and so on. The loss of meaning time may not be appreciable from one day to the next. But when we begin to ruminate on our growth over, say, the past few months, and realize just how much time has not been dedicated to achieving our ideals because of a partiality towards consuming content, lost time really does become lost meaning.

³⁸ To put this into perspective: If one were to spend an average of 1 hour per day scrolling through social media (which might sound outlandish to some but is in fact an understatement for many of the present generation), then over the course of 10 years that is 3,650 hours of content consumption—3,650 hours of meaningful time that is lost to the void of consumption.

VII Meaningful Reflection

Have you ever watched a play, listened to a song, or in some way observed the creative expression of another person that reached out to you on such a level as to induce a certain kind of emotive movement within yourself? For most, the answer would be yes. We often call these ‘moving’ moments, and for many these kinds of experiences are recounted as deeply meaningful. Although we find ourselves situated as observers in these moments, such occasions can have significant impacts on our lives, the ways in which we understand ourselves, and the relations we have to others.

One might wonder at this point, if the possibility of such instances contradicts the idea of passive consumption as antithetical to individual meaning. On the face of it, this would seem to be the case, but delving further into the phenomenological experience of moving moments, we see that activity is still an integral element of the meaning found in such cases. When one is moved to tears by a scene conducted on the stage, for example, the interaction within the scene in some way reaches out to us and touches a part of our emotional understanding (or perhaps even acts to develop ourselves as emotional beings) such that a part of our being is truly ‘moved’ by the experience. We reflect on the series of events that culminated in the action in front of us and piecing this all together into a narrative,³⁹ we are drawn into the action and brought into the emotional experience.

A meaningful moment brought about by the expression of others is not a passive experience. We do not find meaning in a song simply because it brings about sadness, nor meaning in a novel that evokes joy, but rather meaning is experienced in the active conscious relation we have with the creative expression before us. Part of our self reaches out into the

³⁹ So much of our experience is understood through the medium of narrative that we are not even necessarily consciously aware of this manner in which we are understanding the world before us.

experience we observe, and we find meaning in our own relation to the beauty of the creative act, the awe-inspiring scene, to the emotive moment.

We see a parallel to this idea in Frankl's work when he recounts the suffering of an elderly gentleman bereaved by the loss of his wife. The man is overcome by sadness and can no longer see the meaning to his life. In the course of one of their therapeutic sessions, Frankl posed a question to him, and the following interaction unfolded:

“What would have happened, Doctor, if you had died first, and your wife would have had to survive you?”...“For her this would have been terrible; how she would have suffered!”...“You see, Doctor, such a suffering has been spared her, and it is you who has spared this suffering—to be sure, at the price that now you have to survive and mourn her.” He said no word but shook my hand and calmly left my office.”⁴⁰

No meaning was to be found in the emotional turmoil of the man's mourning itself. Yet, Frankl was able to reorient his patient's relation to the tragedy such that, even in the face of great sadness, meaning could still be possible. This is all to say that when we experience meaningful moments that appear to be brought about by observation alone, there is in fact an active component to the meaningful moment found in our reflective relation to the emotion brought on by experience.

If we consider that for meaning to be found in observation there is an active reflection required on the part of the individual experiencing the meaningful moment, then we ought to be concerned with our capacity to reflect on the experiences we encounter. I mentioned that incorporating the emotive into narrative understanding is an integral aspect of meaning, this

⁴⁰ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 113.

relates both to the moving moments described above as well as the growth found in the temporal understanding we have of ourselves as we project ourselves forward and backward in time.⁴¹

Thus, let us return to the problematic of social media content consumption. The loss of meaning time incurred by consumption in the social media space has already been explored, but what of the transforming relationship we have to self-reflection that our increasing time spent on social media may have? An observational experience like a play, a movie, a song even, that brings about meaningful experience affords time during and after the experience for our reflection. Often, we look back on moments that we describe as meaningful in the context of our lives, but which at the time were not experienced as such—a tragedy for example. Yet, this is not how the observational experience of social media operates.

With constant streams of content on social media platforms, we are continually moving on to consume the next piece of content. Before we have time to pause and reflect upon our own relation to the content we observe, we are already experiencing the next post, video, image, etc., that the algorithm delivers us. I do not wish to claim that there is no content in the social media space that might bring meaning to the life of someone who observes it,⁴² but rather that the structure of social media platforms is such that the content is not brought to the user with the intentionality of it being reflected upon, but merely as a means to retain the conscious experience of the user within the application.

Further than the continual movement of our consciousness through posts, the bandwidth of the content we consume is becoming ever shorter. Take TikTok, for example, a platform built upon video clips lasting but a few seconds. No time is afforded to the observer to reflect on the content before it is over and the next piece of content is presented to us. YouTube, Instagram,

⁴¹ Described in section VI.

⁴² I would argue to the contrary in fact.

Snapchat, and many other outlets have followed suit with the immensely shortened format of digital media (pioneered in many ways by TikTok). Short bursts of entertainment are not necessarily in themselves detrimental to experiencing meaning in one's life but the combination of this shortened format of observational experience with the increasing proportion of lived experience spent within the confines of the social media space most certainly is. Neither the reflective element of meaning formation, nor the temporal requisite of experiencing meaning time are afforded whilst consuming such short format digital content—an ever-growing proportion of experience in our time.

VIII Negative Feedback Loops and the Existential Vacuum

Social media is often a place people turn to as a means of escapism from their daily lives. If this statement appears over encompassing, one need only spend a short amount of time in any given public place and take notice of the continuous stream of people with their eyes glued to their screens—looking up merely to avoid collisions with those around them. If there was any doubt regarding the success of the algorithmic model by which social media platforms keep their audience captivated, then the swathes of people locked to their devices in public should allay any dubiousness. Yet, escaping the tribulations of our lives outside the digital sphere is problematized by the very design of the social spaces into which we seek escape.

It occurred to me while taking up this philosophical pursuit, that the escapism offered by social media is by no means one from which I am, myself, recused. I have often caught myself, almost automatically, opening social media apps⁴³ as if guided by a hand that was not my own. It was, in fact, Viktor Frankl's work that opened my eyes to the existential reasons that underlie my own, and seemingly many others', need for escapism.

⁴³ Which I have since removed from my own device over the course of pursuing this inquiry.

Frankl describes a concept he refers to as the ‘existential vacuum.’ An inner sense of meaninglessness, which may be consciously or subconsciously active. He writes of its sufferers: “They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves; they are caught in a situation which I have called the existential vacuum.”⁴⁴ It is precisely this void that prompts turns towards escapism. When one’s experience of reality is mediated by an inner sense of meaninglessness, there is an urge to move away from that experience. Escapism is no new process of course, substances like alcohol have been used for centuries to this effect. But it appears that social media is beginning to operate as one such alternate reality into which the plights of the existential vacuum might be evaded.

Intriguingly, Frankl identifies the principal manifestation of the existential vacuum as residing within “a state of boredom.”⁴⁵ A sense of boredom, a dissatisfaction with the world around us, seems to drive so many into the virtual world. This dissatisfaction with unmediated reality is starkly noticeable at large events, like concerts, where even in the presence of musical brilliance, strobe effects, and crowds of people all sharing their appreciation for a single artist, so many watch the entire event unfold through the camera on their smartphones. I even recall being at a concert where the front man asked the audience members to drop their phones for one song and to be wholly present in the moment. Most ignored this request flagrantly (though I am certain it made for a great clip on their Instagram feeds).

Yet, as people turn towards social media as an escape from reality, they are confronted by the content of others doing exactly the same thing. One accesses a given social media platform, and begins to scroll through content, pausing briefly when something catches the attention, but is then faced by a piece of content (a meme, a video clip, a status update) that deals precisely with

⁴⁴ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 106.

⁴⁵ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 106.

the feelings that one has turned to the platform to evade. In a sort of morbid sadism, one watches on and finds some sense of relatability, the algorithm takes notice, and the existential vacuum is reinforced by the same outlet in which its escape was sought.

Consuming digital content is no trivial process, every time we like, react to, and observe social media posts our online experience is fundamentally altered by the algorithm that takes notice of all our online actions. More posts that reinforce the existential vacuum appear on our screens, our feelings of meaninglessness are reinforced through a sense of collective relation to them, we chase the next piece of relatable content, and the scrolling continues.

Nearly all of us now possess a means of escapism in the form of a digital device in our pocket. Yet, turning to our devices to avoid the troubles of our lived experiences is not only in many cases futile, but denies the potentiality of alleviating unnecessary suffering and the growth that can be found in facing that which burdens us head on. As Frankl puts it, “For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one’s predicament into a human achievement.”⁴⁶ The existential vacuum is not to be conquered by diverting conscious experience to the digital world, which in fact operates as a mechanism to reify the troubles with which we already relate. Rather, Frankl implores us to actively reorient ourselves towards meaning despite, or in fact through, our suffering.

Conclusion

It may appear that all I have offered in this examination is a damning condemnation of our evolving relationship with social media. Of course, I have not been able to touch upon the number of positive attributes afforded by social media platforms. Instant communication with loved ones

⁴⁶ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 112.

in far off countries, meeting people with shared interests, and building virtual communities are all facets of the immensely expansive digital world of social media. Each of these components of social media platforms could well be argued as mechanisms by which we might attain personal ideals upon which meaning has been grounded in this reflection. I do not wish to dispute such claims, and in fact implore further exploration into the existential implications of any particular feature of the social media experience. But, as was mentioned in the outset of this paper, social media represents such a vast array of functionality and experience that attempting to describe the impacts of social media on the human-meaning relation as a totality would undoubtedly lead to generalization and misrepresentation.

What remains evident, however, is that some aspect (and perhaps there are many) of the social media experience is leading to an increase in neurological harms to a generation raised upon it. I have attempted to identify in the preceding pages the existential harms of shifting our experience into the realm of digital content consumption, which in reference to the work of James and Frankl offers some explanation as to how social media can operate to disrupt, distort, and deny our own personal relation to meaning—both in the pursuit and the experience of it.

As screen time and the percentage of the population making use of social media rises, it is difficult to foresee these platforms becoming anything but a greater part of our lives. For better or worse, social media is here to stay and to mediate our relations to other people. It is crucial, then, that we do not step further into this era of transformed human relations blindly. Evidently, social media platforms will continue to be motivated by profit margins correlated with the volume of users and their time spent within the digital spaces they provide. This motivation, however, does not correspond with concern for the existential well-being of those who make use of such applications. Thus, the greater awareness we have as individuals, and as a social collective, of the

problematic features of social media, the better equipped we are to regulate the role that social media plays in our lives.

Certainly, the purview of social media will continue to expand into unmapped territories that pose potential experiences and relations that have never before been a component of the human experience. Yet, what will remain true is the fundamental need for the pursuit and experience of meaning in our lives. Any structure that presents a redefinition of the experiences and relationships we have with others must be considered in the context of its existential implications. Social media will remain an integral element of social relations, as will our search for meaning, the coexistence of this structure and orientation must be navigated in tandem.

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