Draft as submitted to Canadian Journal of Practical Philosophy. Please cite published version available on their site for free at the following URL: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/csspe/vol5/1/5/

Free and Always Will Be?

On Social Media Participation as it Undermines Individual Autonomy

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Abstract: Social media participation undermines individual autonomy in ways that ought to concern ethicists. Discussions in the philosophical literature are concerned primarily with egregious conduct online such as harassment and shaming, keeping the focus on obvious ills to which no one could consent; this prevents a wider understanding of the risks and harms of quotidian social media participation. Two particular concerns occupy me; social media participation carries the risks of (1) negatively formative experiences and (2) continuous partial attention due to our habituation to the variable rewards that social media platforms provide. Although social media offers benefits as well as risks, self-knowledge of whether one benefits more than one suffers from one's social media participation is vexed by the very processes involved in participating. We are not as free to leave social media as we are to enter. I conclude with consideration and rejection of the objections that the ubiquity of the practice indicates implied consent to risks, and that users of social media can simply choose not to use such communication technologies at all. I argue that we cannot be said to meaningfully consent to enter into social media usage, even implicitly, and we do not all have equally easy options to avoid the contexts that provide the stimuli of persistent desires.

Keywords: autonomy, continuous partial attention, forced consent, ludic loops, social media participation, the Stroop effect, transformative experiences

I. Introduction

Participation in social media is not an obviously concerning practice for ethicists. It is a leisurely pastime for many, a trivial and quotidian thing. Yet social media participation also undermines, or seriously risks undermining, individual autonomy in at least two ways. First, the consequences of social media participation can include what I call negatively formative experiences akin to L. A. Paul's *transformative experiences*, the impact of which we cannot know in advance and cannot meaningfully consent to in advance.[1] One can neither predict whether an unexpected influx of negative responses on social media will happen to oneself, nor whether the experience of indefinite amounts of negativity will be transformative of one's mental states and future attitudes. When the consequences of one's negatively formative experiences include uncontrollable alterations of one's preferences in ways that substantially affect one's life choices in ways one would otherwise find undesirable, then one's autonomy is reduced.

Second, social media platforms include variable reward mechanisms that render users more likely to become habituated to ludic loops of repetitive, reward-seeking behavior, that is, staying on or returning to a social media site in order to garner the variable rewards built into the platform. James Williams, with others, refers to this as the "slot-machine effect."[2] Reward-seeking behavior may be habituating to a degree one cannot anticipate and to a degree one would not desire. It is an open question as to whether social media is addictive; more importantly for my purposes, one can suffer consequences of variable-reward habituation well short of addiction, including continuous partial attention, an undesirable change in one's cognitive capacities that further diminishes one's autonomy.[3] Uma Narayan's minimalist conception of autonomy

[1] L. A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[2] James Williams, *Stand out of Our Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 35.
[3] The term *continuous partial attention* was coined by Linda Stone, a consultant and software developer; some social scientists have taken up the phrase but tend to refer more often to distraction from *multitasking* or

includes the condition that one is "not subject to literal outright coercion by others," but when variable rewards are a feature built into social media platform design, I hold that one's autonomy is at least undermined by the slot machine effect.[4]

One might suggest that any potential user of social media is free to stay offline, just as any individual is free to stay out of a casino, and anyone capable of reading can review and consent to the terms of agreement available on social network sites (SNS).[5] This is partially correct; those of us capable of reading can review terms of agreement, and some of us are free to avoid ever entering some SNS in the first place. In what follows, I argue that, although users may be competent to click the button that accepts the terms and conditions of (for example) Twitter insofar as we have the requisite capacities to consent and the available option to choose not to enter, in the course of using the SNS our capacities are likely to become undermined by engineered ludic loops so that we do not always retain competence to consent in the course of performing participation. When that happens, we are not as free to leave social media as we are to enter.

The changes to ordinary lives brought about by social media participation have not gone unnoticed by philosophers. However, to date philosophers have focused on moral wrongs to which no one can, in principle, consent, including shaming, harassment, abuse, stalking, and

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hypernatural monitoring, and the related concepts capture so many of the same related phenomena that I limit myself to referring to the loss of focus and distraction with which I'm concerned as continuous partial attention in this essay. See Linda Stone, "Continuous Partial Attention," at *The Attention Project* on her blog (copyright 2002-2017, https://lindastone.net/qa/continuous-partial-attention/). On multitasking, see L. Mark Carriera, Larry D. Rosena, Nancy A. Cheever, and Alex F. Lim, "Causes, Effects, and Practicalities of Everyday Multitasking," *Developmental Review* 35 (2015): 64–78. On hypernatural monitoring, see Samuel P.L. Veissière and Moriah Stendel, "Hypernatural Monitoring: A Social Rehearsal Account of Smartphone Addiction," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, article 141 (2018): 1-10.

[4] Uma Narayan, "Minds Of Their Own: Choices, Autonomy, Cultural Practices and Other Women," in L. Antony and C. Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One's Own. Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002), 418–432: 429.

[5] In this essay, I prefer to discuss social media participation generally, and I consider social networking site participation to be a subset of social media participation more widely.

threats of violence.[6] I have participated in the literature over-focused on the harms to which no one would consent.[7] My focus in this essay is different, but like those who have written on serious harms in cyberspace, I am concerned with the autonomy of social media participants. As Rebecca Kukla says, autonomy includes positive bodily agency and negative freedom from intrusion.[8] It is widely recognized that negative freedom from intrusions such as shaming, harassment, stalking, and threats of violence are critical to autonomy, especially to mental health, senses of safety and actual safety, and social functionality. For my purposes, it is noteworthy that the goods of social media participation are also, increasingly and for many, critical to autonomy, including mental health and social functionality.

It may, to the less-concerned, seem that the benefits of social media, if unimportant, are at least pleasant in the way that leisure is generally pleasant, and therefore all we need to do is recommend against harms to which no one could consent; assess shaming and harassing as wrong, and we've said all ethicists need to say. Yet as Kukla points out, consent is not enough for communications to go well.[9] We can refrain from doxxing[10] or threats of violence, but this does not necessarily result in healthy, flourishing users. It is better established in social sciences and technology studies that social media is important, in positive ways, to the flourishing of some users. Some interventions and self-regulatory practices may be permissive of social media

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[6] See, in addition to the sources in note 4, Emma A. Jane, "Flaming? What Flaming? The Pitfalls and Potentials of Researching Online Hostility," *Ethics and Information Technology* 17 (2015):65-87; Majid Khosravinik & Eleonora Esposito, "Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally-Mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-Based Hostility," *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 14 (2018):45-68; Nikil Mukerji, "What is Fake News?" *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2018): 923-946; Brett Frischmann and Evan Selinger, *Re-Engineering Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[7] [Footnote omitted for anonymity.]
[8] Rebecca Kukla, "That's What She Said: The Language of Sexual Negotiation," *Ethics* 129 (2018): 70–97.
[9] Ibid., 72.
[10] For a fuller understanding of doxing, see Shannon Vallor, "Social Networking and Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-social-networking/ .

participation that yields benefits to users without drawing us into some of its more diffuse drawbacks. The benefits for many can include emotional regulation, affective bonding, and improved access to information. For instance, in non-routine situations such as the aftermath of disasters, "social media have been found to provide psychological benefits for users: The more individuals actively engaged in social media communication, the more they benefitted emotionally in terms of feeling relieved and as a part of a like-minded community."[11] Of course, users in crisis are also able to get information and to communicate across distances when information and communications are otherwise frustrated.[12] In nonemergency settings such as undergraduate universities, researchers found that students' use of social media, especially when connecting to other on-campus students, facilitated adjustment to university and the development of friendships; they add that the social comparisons motivated by social network browsing are mistakenly assumed to be negative, yet especially when students are comparing their opinions and experiences rather than their abilities, social comparisons can have some positive effects on one's self-understanding.[13] Even cat-video sharing seems to provide some users, and not all users, with virtual pet-therapy benefits.[14] In short, one cannot easily dismiss all social media as bad or beneath notice, given its benefits to multitudes across different situations, any more than one can safely assume social media is beneficial to everyone.

II. Social media participation risks negatively formative experience

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[11] German Neubaum, Leonie Rösner, Astrid M. Rosenthal-von der Pütten, and Nicole C. Krämer, "Psychosocial functions of social media usage in a disaster situation: A multi-methodological approach," *Computers in Human Behavior* 34 (2014), 28-38: 38.
[12] Ibid., 28.
[13] Chia-chen Yang and Angela Robinson, "Not Necessarily Detrimental: Two Social Comparison Orientations and Their Associations with Social Media Use and College Social Adjustment," *Computers in Human Behavior* 84 (2018): 49-57.
[14] Jessica Gall Myrick, "Emotion Regulation, Procrastination, and Watching Cat Videos Online: Who Watches Internet Cats, Why, and to What Effect?" *Computers in Human Behavior* 52 (2015): 168-176.

The above examples of ordinary benefits are foreseeable by would-be users, and one might argue that when one enters any SNS, one does so with reasonable expectations of the good effects of participation. Therefore, arguably we can be said to be acting intentionally and autonomously, in the sense that we consent in advance to the terms of use of social media, because we foresee pleasant benefits that we choose to pursue. However, I suggest that we may not be able to meaningfully consent in advance, if informed consent requires understanding the risks to our well-being inherent to social media.[15] We cannot anticipate all the effects of abusive content online[16], and the epistemic challenges to being truly informed about what online abuse is like are magnified by the efforts of social media platform designers to subvert our choice-making capacities to stop looking, once online.[17]

I am especially interested in the risks we face as humans prone to *negativity bias*, that is, the selective attention of the brain to negative information and the capacity to remember one insult better than multiple compliments.[18] Drawing on Paul's account of transformative experience, I argue that we cannot know in advance what it is like to experience the types and

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[15] The answer to the article title turns out to be one in one thousand: Yannis Bakos, Florencia Marotta-Wurgler, and David R. Trossen, "Does Anyone Read the Fine Print? Consumer Attention to Standard-Form Contracts," *The Journal of Legal Studies* 43 (2014): 1-35. In this essay, I do not mean consent in the limited sense implied by online contracts; I am not saying simply that most of us who use Twitter neglect to read Twitter's formal Terms of Agreement, although that is also true.

[16] I follow Nobata et al in referring to abusive content, which is not limited to harassment, profanity, or hate-speech, although abusive content certainly includes all of those things; as I argue later, our negativity bias disposes us to retain and ruminate on passing abuses including mere insult in our direction, whether or not it is part of a pattern of harassment or rises to the level of hate speech; Chikashi Nobata, Joel Tetreault, Achint Thomas, Yashar Mehdad, and Yi Chang, "Abusive language detection in online user content," *Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on World Wide Web*, International World Wide Web Conferences Steering Committee (2016): 145-153. Accessed May 22, 2019: yichang-cs.com/yahoo/WWW16_Abusivedetection.pdf.

[17] I appreciate that nonsighted users also take in content from Twitter, but my concern in this paper is with users who are manipulated by the visual stimulations of notification icons and the color red, so throughout the paper I refer to 'looking' as well as 'reading.'

[18] There are, as it turns out, multiple threats to individual and collective well-being posed by social media over-participation, but in the scope of this essay, I focus on the negative mental burdens to which we are prone and that we cannot anticipate in their fullness.

amounts of anonymous insults or targeted hostilities and their effects that social media permits.[19] Research in psychology indicates that we also cannot know in advance if we are dispositionally more or less likely to find that the negativity to which we're exposed has high, enduring impact or low, brief impact on our psyches, so social media negativity may also be a personally transformative experience.[20] Even when experiences with abusive content online are not profoundly transformative (in the deep way that Paul describes childbearing as profoundly transformative), the experience may be formative of our identities in ways that permanently alter our attitudes toward ourselves and others in ways we would not have chosen; I refer to these as *negatively formative experiences* short of transformation. Such transformative experiences and negatively formative experiences are those we would not choose if we knew what they would be like. Therefore, even when we enter eagerly into social media for pleasant leisurely reasons, I argue that we cannot meaningfully consent in advance to the gambles that we take with our mental well-being.

Consider that, according to one estimate, smartphone users each touch their phones 2,617 times each day, on average; Apple recently confirmed that its device users unlock their phones 80 times every day (5 times every waking hour on average).[21] The variety of activity represented

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[19] Paul, *Transformative Experience* (2014).

[20] Pew Research Center analysts find that the impacts of online harassment, in particular, can be significant, but the duration of the effects is not predictable in advance and depends on a wide variety of factors including individuals' social supports, genetics, dispositions, and well-being prior to harassment; Pew Research Center, "Online Harassment," (2014, accessed May 15, 2019): http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/. Clinician Samantha Silverberg notes that effects of online verbal abuse can include a decreased ability to concentrate, difficulty in making day-to-day decisions and increased levels of anxiety, to extents that "can drastically change how an individual engages," although this, again, depends on the individual; it is moving, if unsettling, to read the Amnesty International research in which Silverberg appears, in which one social media user comments, "My friends have noticed a huge difference in me since;" see Amnesty International, "The Psychological Harms of Violence and Abuse Against Women Online," *Toxic Twitter* (2018, accessed May 15, 2019): https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-6/ .

[21] The first number appears in the widely discussed study by Dscout research; smartphone users were found to touch their phone an average of 2,617 times a day, and the heavy users did so more than 5,000 times a day. The full report is "Mobile Touches: dscout's inaugural study on humans and their tech," dscout, Inc. (2016), accessed

by these numbers includes social media engagement distributed by a single user to many. Smartphone users may scatter replies, comments, or judgments across more than one target and across more than one platform. But the same users are also the potential targets of the replies and judgments of fellow users, inundated with sensory and emotional inputs. One cannot know in advance when one will be the object of others' online attentions. And once in our memories, the negativity bias, to which almost all humans are prone, will incline us to return to insults far more often than any compliment.[22]

Those familiar with the Stroop effect, that is, our selective attention in the presence of conflicting cognitive stimuli, will understand that just as it is difficult to read a word for a color and perceive the ink's different color with equal speed, it is also difficult for the brain to give insults and compliments equal weight.[23] We are set up to be jarred by insults. This isn't always bad, of course. One does not want to remember everything; it would be a huge cognitive load to no end. Instead, one remembers some things and not others. It is adaptive to do so. As a result, we are more inclined to process some information and hold on to it. Unfortuntely, once insults move in, they take up residence in our memories, and our memories are not under our controls. Would that they were.

May 15, 2019, https://pages.dscout.com/mobile-touches-download-form. Apple user-frequency was separately studied by Apple and statistics shared at a widely reported company briefing; see for an example of such reportage Mikey Campbell, "Average iPhone user unlocks device 80 times per day, 89% use Touch ID, Apple says," appleinsider.com (Monday, April 18, 2016, accessed May 15, 2019), https://appleinsider.com/articles/16/04/19/average-iphone-user-unlocks-device-80-times-per-day-89-use-touch-id-apple-says.

[22] The human propensity for negative attention bias, or negativity bias, is described as demonstrated via Stroop test by many authors, including the widely cited work by Roy F., Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen D. Vohs, "Bad is stronger than good," *Review of General Psychology* 5 (2001): 323-370.

[23] Colin MacLeod's overview of the Stroop test and related literature is a helpful overview for understanding J.R. Stroop's original experiments and influence; Colin M. MacLeod, "Half a century of research on the Stroop effect: an integrative review," Psychological bulletin 109 (1991): 163.

Note that I am not describing the occupation of one's minds by insults as a risk on the part of social media "addicts." One need not be addicted to anything to be subject to the Stroop effect, merely habituated to reading.[24] And users of social media are habituated to reading.

The mental occupation I describe may not always be deeply transformative, but I hope it is clear why I hold that negatively formative experiences with abusive content bear some relation to what Paul describes as a transformative experience, insofar as it is not possible to rationally predict whether one will prefer to be so mentally rearranged. For Paul, experiences are transformative when their consequences for one's life or identity are profound in some way, and when those of us who have not yet had the experience cannot fully appreciate what is rational for the transformed agent, given changes to desires and deliberations that are results of the experience one can only know post-transformation.[25] Not all social media users find that the effects on one's mental states are enduring or profound, and the impact can vary with known and unknown qualities of individual minds. That very unpredictability of effect suggests that the Stroop effect of online abuse is related to Paul's saying, regarding *epistemic transformative experiences*, "In this sort of situation, you know very little about your possible future... And so, if you want to make the decision by thinking about what your lived experience would be like if you decided to undergo the experience, you have a problem. In such a situation, you find yourself facing a decision where you lack the information you need to make the decision the way you naturally want to make it—by assessing what the different possibilities would be like and choosing between them."[26] I extend Paul's insight into situations in which one knows that one's

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[24] This is why experimental subjects in Stroop-style tests shown the word for one color in the tint of another color will find it easier to say the word rather than the tint; reading is an effortless habit in the presence of a mentally effortful conflict. The Stroop test demonstrates the increase in cognitive load and subsequently delayed response that results from attentional conflict.

[25] Paul, *Transformative Experience*.

[26] Ibid., 2-3.

choices can incur personally altering effects, in order to argue that even when one does not know that entering into social media takes the risk of epistemically transformative experiences, encounters with unpredictable insult or verbal abuse also may turn out to be personally transformative or at least negative and formative in ways one would not have chosen.

Paul says, regarding *personally transformative experiences*, that they relate to experiences that effect changes in who one takes oneself to be, post-transformation; again, one cannot know in advance of the experience how it will fundamentally change one's point of view or the value-laden preferences that previously constituted one's view of one's character.[27] She adds that experiences may be epistemically transformative, personally transformative, or both. I extend her view to less transformative, but formative, experiences, because we cannot know what it feels like in advance to receive online abuse and we cannot know if it will live in our memories. Typical human disposition to negativity bias entails that most of us take a risk with our mental well-being, or at least our emotional attention, when we participate in a world wide web of unpredictable users of words. It is only a risk; the formative experience of online abuse is not *inevitably* personally transformative. I have witnessed some social media users frankly marvel at reception of abusive content on the very platforms on which they experience it, without reporting any permanent alterations in their core preferences, values, or self-conceptions. However, some users indeed report actual changes to their personality over time as a result of online abuse, especially as they come to realize how they are perceived from the perspectives of their insulters, that is, their imagined audience.[28]

[27] Paul, *Transformative Experience*, 16.

[28] See, in addition to the sources in note 24, Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (New York: Riverhead, 2015).

Regardless of our knowledge in advance, or a formal set of conditions of agreement, no one can meaningfully consent in advance to harmful content online, because the experience of encountering abusive speech is unpredictable and the duration of its impact is only discoverable through experience.[29] Experiences such as these undermine our autonomy when they alter our self-conceptions for the worse and our abilities to communicate with others.

III. Continuous partial attention and dependence upon ludic loops of reward

Although the philosophical literature on consent in social media is still young, the software engineers of social media have raised articulate alarms regarding their own creations. For example, Justin Rosenstein compares SnapChat to "heroin" and compares Facebook 'likes' to "bright dings of pseudo-pleasure" that can be "as hollow as they are seductive;" journalist Paul Lewis adds that "Rosenstein should know: he was the Facebook engineer who created the 'like' button in the first place."[30] (Around the same time that Rosenstein did so, Lewis adds, Facebook developers also changed the notification symbol from blue to red; they found that changing it to red resulted in far more engagement, as the alarming color triggered most users' senses of urgency and reward.) Tristan Harris, a Google product manager, shares worries similar to Rosenstein's: "All of our minds can be hijacked.…Our choices are not as free as we think they

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[29] In discussion of a previous version of this paper, an audience member noted that one can also have the experience of witnessing the distress of friends and family with whom one identifies or empathizes. I agree that this is an experience which can inform one's preferences and choices of conduct. I cannot agree that it is qualitatively the same as experiencing it oneself, which influences one's basic preferences and perceptions as to who one is in the social realm. Lamenting the experiences of others does not amount to the sort of formative experience that I have attempted to convey in this essay.
[30] Rosenstein is quoted by Paul Lewis; see Lewis, "'Our minds can be hijacked': the tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia," *The Guardian*, Oct.6, 2017: 6. Accessed May 22, 2019: www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia 1/12.

are."[31] Harris provides the interviewer with the comparison of social media users to gamblers, specifically with respect to the ludic loops incurred by the "pull-to-refresh" mechanism:

> The most seductive design, Harris explains, exploits the same psychological susceptibility that makes gambling so compulsive: variable rewards. When we tap those apps with red icons, we don't know whether we'll discover an interesting email, an avalanche of "likes", or nothing at all.
>
> It is the possibility of disappointment that makes it so compulsive.
>
> It's this that explains how the pull-to-refresh mechanism, whereby users swipe down, pause and wait to see what content appears, rapidly became one of the most addictive and ubiquitous design features in modern technology. "Each time you're swiping down, it's like a slot machine," Harris says. "You don't know what's coming next."[32]

Rosenstein and Harris are describing the state of users already active on social media. I add to their observations that our initial entry into social media is like entry into a casino, voluntary in some ways, even if manipulatively rehabituated as they describe.[33] One may seek out company voluntarily; the prosocial desires that inform the choice to enter social media are fundamental and include urges to be recognized by others, but there are a multiplicity of ways to

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[31] Quoted in Lewis, "'Our minds can be hijacked': the tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia," *The Guardian.*

[32] Ibid.

[33] I am further influenced by the work of Natasha Dow Schull, an expert in scholarship of casino gambling who has turned her attention to online gambling, but I extend her comparisons to consideration of other forms of mobile information technology usage, more broadly conceived; see Natasha Dow Schull, "Digital Gambling: The Coincidence of Desire and Design," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social* Science 597.1 (2005): 65-81. Veissière and Stendel relatedly point out that "there is nothing inherently addictive about mobile technology," and it is rather the expectations of social rewards that moves people to become addicted via usage; Samuel P.L. Veissière and Moriah Stendel, "Hypernatural Monitoring: A Social Rehearsal Account of Smartphone Addiction," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, article 141 (2018): 1-10.

satisfy those urges and firing up an app is only one of them. Decision-capable adults have the competence to consent. The problem is that, although users may be competent to click the button that accepts the terms and conditions of Twitter insofar as we have the requisite capacities *to* consent and the available option to choose not to enter, in the course of using the platform our capacities become undermined by engineered ludic loops so that we do not always retain competence to consent *in the course of* performing participation.[34]

We are not as free to leave as we are to enter, because the variable rewards are constantly flowing to us in ways that alter some of the mental states that affect the very conditions for decision-capable consent. More than nudges, which may manipulate preferences temporarily, the ludic loops of social media platforms are designed to be mood-altering and to have a high or constant event-frequency.[35] Moreover, once we are habituated to expect and anticipate ludic loops of variable reward, re-entry into social media on future occasions seems less transparently consensual than they may have been at first. One need not go so far as to agree that social media is addictive, if it is sufficiently problematic for consent that our ability to form and know our preferences is altered by those who engineer social media to degrade our attention spans and motivate our preference for the sorts of ludic loops that social media provides.

There is a growing literature arguing that social media users demonstrate behavioral addiction, but even physiological addicts have autonomy in a general sense. As Neil Levy argues, “At worst, addicts are subject to impairments of autonomy” at times when “they

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[34] I take the distinction between (advance) competence (in the sense of capacity to consent) and (use-)competence (in the course of performing that to which one consented) from Gita Cale, although I do so in a way very differently than the author intended; see Gita S. Cale, “Continuing the debate over risk-related standards of competence,” *Bioethics* 13.2 (1999):131–148.

[35] Schull notes that “event frequency is correlated with development of any addiction” (Natasha Dow Schull, “Digital Gambling: The Coincidence of Desire and Design,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social* Science 597.1 (2005): 322n72).

encounter cues that trigger their cravings," but "for the great majority of the time… addicts are as autonomous as you and me" to an extent that preserves their capacities for informed consent.[36] To retain that consent-enabling autonomy, Levy points out, an addict or anyone without addiction but with a "persistent desire" need simply turn attention away from the cues that trigger desires. Levy adds, "Addicts find this technique difficult to employ, since the cues that trigger their cravings tend to capture their attention. However, they can take steps to avoid encountering the cues in the first place."[37] He suggests that avoiding the cues may involve avoiding the contexts that one associates with the persistent desire or addiction.

This is good news for those of us who can arrange our lives to avoid contexts we associate with some kinds of persistent desire. Unfortunately for social media users accustomed to ludic loops of reward, the triggering contexts associated with reward are those of starting up the computer and using one's smartphone. Depending on one's job, one's responsibilities for family and childcare, and one's alternatives for sources of information, these contexts can be extremely difficult to arrange one's life to avoid. In this essay I aim to attend to social media use in particular and not conflate the use of social media with the use of smartphones and computers generally, but here the relationship between them is important; to the extent that many of us have become dependent upon computers and smartphones, we have become subject to ego-depleting triggers to open a new tab in a browser, or tap a social media app on the phone.[38] For most readers of this essay, the very screen on which one reads this paper is a context that provides

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[36] Neil Levy, "Addiction, Autonomy and Ego-Depletion: A Response to Bennett Foddy and Julian Savulescu," *Bioethics* 20.1 (2006), 16–20: 20.
[37] Ibid.
[38] See Levy, "Addiction, Autonomy and Ego-Depletion," 19, regarding ego-depletion, that is, the effect of diminished self-control due to exertion of self-control over time; Levy describes self-control as a limited resource and analogizes self-control with muscles that, after exertions, become subsequently harder to call upon. It is out of the scope of this short paper to address the mounting literature suggesting that Smartphone users are addicted to their phones, so I content myself with noting that it is no longer really a debate as to whether smartphone users have a widespread level of problematic use.

ego-depleting triggers, and it may likely be the case that just since beginning to read this essay, one has also checked one's email or messages and opened at least one tab on a computer browser, whether one wanted to or not; perhaps one did not realize until now that one had done so at all.

IV. Social Media Participation does not indicate implicit consent

Of course, perhaps one wants to return to social media. If people are just trying to have fun or avoid looking at each other at the bus stop, if the risks of harm are low for most, then perhaps participants in social media do not care that we give over "forced consent," that is, consent bundled with access[39], to social media platforms. One may even argue that participants in social media could be said to *implicitly* consent to will-undermining practices of social media; our very participation in such activities as Twitter and Facebook, in conjunction with our broader knowledge of the nature of online communication, might indicate we are all performing acts of implicit consent in using social media platforms. More than one philosopher has suggested that criticism and even insult is to be expected online and we all know what we're getting into, and should simply be (better educated or very resigned) adults. My response is based on our limited freedom to change our contexts or leave social media.

As Nicolás Maloberti says of political consent, "for an act of consent to count as such, there must be something that is possible to do which counts as refusing to consent.[40] While it is

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[39] The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into effect in Europe at the end of May 2018, legislation that immediately permitted groups to file complaints in courts arguing against Facebook, Google, and Twitter for practices of "forced consent," on the grounds that bundling consent with access and stipulating that access requires consent violates the GDPR. See the most well-known complaint at the following URL: https://noyb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ pa_forcedconsent_en.pdf.

[40] Nicolás Maloberti, "The Fallacy of Consent," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 44 (2010), 469-476: 472. My appeal to Maloberti's argument is motivated by my researching the recent lawsuits against "forced consent" in cyberspace on the same day that I read Maloberti's rejection of implicit consent to political authority, on very similar lines; a notion of implicit consent via participation would seem to require an alternative freedom to refuse to consent. I

true that one could refuse to participate in social media, it also seems to be the case that leaving social media has costs for some more than others, to such an extent that a blanket recommendation to refuse to participate is not practical or supportive of one's autonomy in other ways. Malobarti similarly notes that of course leaving a state is possible, but for some more costly than others; he cites David Hume, who "questioned how realistic it is to consider the option to emigrate as an available alternative for individuals to whom the prospects of emigrating would be clearly undesirable."[41] In addition to my concern given the evidence that our wills are undermined with respect to freely considering emigration from social media, I share a worry analogous to Hume's and Malobarti's. I do not believe that everyone equally enjoys the absence of cost if they leave social media. My costs, for example, would be low; I am an established, tenured professor who will never need to look for a job again and cannot be fired without cause, as well as blessed with a partner and a large extended family. Those who are still struggling, still networking, or socially isolated cannot leave social media as easily as I can. So the acts we tend to think of as counting as refusing to consent to social media, such as deleting accounts from SNS or taking a holiday from the Internet, are not equally available to all; uneven options to leave do not seem sufficient to Maloberti's ethical demand that for an act of consent to count as such, there must be something that is possible to do which counts as refusing to consent.

Further, implicit consent relies on assumptions that the activity permitting the inference of explicit consent is voluntary; Maloberti offers the example of one who goes to a restaurant and orders a meal as implicitly consenting to the expectation that he pay for it.[42] The customer need not go with the intention of ordering food in order to spend money; his intention may only be to

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realize that this essay has mixed informed consent in bioethics with consent to be governed in political theory, and I do so with apologies for the necessity of their admixture in ways the authors did not intend.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Maloberti, "The Fallacy of Consent," 470.

satisfy a yen for lasagna. But we can fairly hold the customer to make the choice to go the restaurant and place the order by choice. I am suggesting in this essay that many individuals' participation in social media cannot be described the same way. If I have been persuasive, then it should be clear that social media cultivates our thoughtlessness, and successfully so. The will to enter social media may be sincere, and motivated by reasons both affective and considered, but the habituation of persons to turn to social media before they even realize that they have done so gives us reason to think that the impulsive reaction to a Facebook post is not the same as choosing to go to a restaurant.

I noted earlier that, as Natasha Dow Schull says, event frequency correlates with addiction. I hope I have shown that social media participation provides the possibilities for indefinite event frequency on a platform so proximate that it is difficult to track. If implicit consent to social media entails voluntarily choosing to engage, then we are not even implicitly consenting to participate so frequently. If we cannot even be said to implicitly consent to our continual returns to ludic loops of reward, then social media undermines our autonomy.

V. Conclusion: Toward a More Successful Sociality

My focus in this essay has been on the disvalue of social media for the autonomy of individuals. Yet I noted in my introduction that social media can also have benefits to individuals, including emotional benefits such as relief and sense of belonging in a like-minded community, epistemic benefits such as self-understanding and communication across distances in rapid time, especially during crises, relational benefits including facilitated adjustment to university and the development of friendships, and even virtual pet-therapy. A social media participant to whom benefits accrue is enjoying the fruits of sociality, and could even be said to

be flourishing precisely because of participation in social media. Feminist philosophers have argued compellingly that relationships enable autonomy, and their insights tell against confidentally recommending against participation in social media for all.[43] Further, although one who uses social media heavily may have her autonomy undermined in some respects, this does not entail that she lacks agency or an authentic self-concept. One's inner freedom is not identical with one's capacity for agency.[44] And as Diana Meyers argues, autonomy admits of degrees; in the non-ideal reality of particular social contexts, one's self-realization does not entail that agent's being able to realize *all* her capacities and potentials, and it may be sufficient to develop those that are critical to the agent's authentic self-concept in the course of the agent's life-plan.[45]

Even if one's behaviors on social media platforms are not, properly speaking, one's own, it is arguable that one is autonomous enough in the ways one cares about; one's identity is of one's own making, intact enough that one can afford to yield swaths of preference-development over to the influences of social network software developers. On individual bases, then, each social media participant might be held to expectations of self-regulation with respect to her social media use, and even when that use is heavy and undermines that individual's autonomy in some respects, it does not necessarily lead to being a less autonomous individual in key respects.

This seems partially correct. One could have negative and formative experiences with abusive content that change one's personality and major communication choices, one could have habituated and excessive use-patterns on social media that one does not even want, and yet one

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[43] Jennifer Nedelsky, "Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts and Possibilities," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 1 (1989): 7–36; see also Natalie Stoljar, "Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2018 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/feminism-autonomy/ .

[44] Michael Garnett, "Agency and Inner Freedom," *Noûs* 51 (2017): 3-23.

[45] Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self? Opposites Attract!", in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 151-180.

could still respond affirmatively to the question as to whether one is authentically following one's life plan and sufficiently free to be oneself. And one may always be so free. I am persuaded by Meyers that everyone's autonomy is conditioned by context and relational. Yet two worries remain.

The first is easy to state briefly, as it is a recapitulation of much of this essay. If an agent is habituated to ludic loops of reward, changed by negatively formative experiences, or both, in other words if an agent's will is already undermined, and if the ego-depleting contexts in which one operates are unavoidable, then how does an agent know that they are pursuing the life plan and freely being the self they want to be? Epistemic obstacles seem built into the project of self-assessment for users of social media, precisely because of the external and engineered mechanisms that give rise to their motivations to continue scrolling.

My second worry is practical and normative rather than epistemic, and suggests directions for ethical prescriptions: Does the existence of an individual whose autonomy is not unduly undermined by social media tell against the argument that social media has disvalue to the extent that it undermines autonomy generally? I suggest the autonomous-enough individual who is happy to be somewhat reliant on social media does not problematize my view of the disvalue of social media for autonomy generally, because an autonomous-enough personal life does not rise to the level of what Lisa Tessman describes as *successful sociality*. Tessman argues that enjoying some of the benefits of sociality may not translate into flourishing, especially if one's own individual enjoyments of some social goods are compatible with, and even come at the cost of, the reduction in flourishing of others.[46] Further, some enjoyments of sociality are not necessarily conducive to one's own flourishing, or the flourishing of the communities to which

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[46] Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005): 73-76.

one belongs. Tessman's perspective that successful sociality is more desirable, and more conducive to robustly autonomous flourishing, than exclusionary or self-absorbed well-being is apt to apply to social media participation. One individual may find it enjoyable or diverting to participate in Twitter at the expense of the well-being of others, to an extent that makes whole communities worse off. If Meyers and others are correct that autonomy is relational, then the worsening of the communities that enable communication and agency is undermining of autonomy even for sufficiently contented agents.

For the sake of autonomous-enough, happy social media users as well as the sakes of their complex communities, I am interested in connecting Tessman's account of successful sociality to Levy's observations that addicts or anyone with a "persistent desire" could turn attention away from the cues that trigger desires, and take steps to avoid encountering the cues in the first place, by avoiding the contexts in which the cues occur. The happy, autonomous-enough social media user may be autonomous in part because of relationships that sustain, affirm, and encourage the happy user. Yet it is not possible to know with great certainty that all of one's own supportive relata are equally autonomous-enough in the presence of ubiquitous ego-depleting triggers to take part in social media.

Therefore, instead of relying on individual self-regulation or individual self-knowledge of one's preferences and choices, agents have good reason to engage in cooperative, relational practices of helping each other to regulate participation in social media and develop better awareness of each other's usage. This could take the form of explicit commitment in public discourse to be communities in which members are encouraged by each other to rotate efforts, reduce individuals' participation, and take turns and breaks from social media with the full support of members of social networks. In popular press and common discourse, solutions to the

problem of social media overuse and abuse tend either to what the social media platforms ought to do at design and engineering levels, or to what individual users ought to do at personal and ethical levels. I think both sorts of recommendations are quite correct, but I do not harbor great hopes that design-level changes will happen, and I am concerned that individual breaks and fasts from social media are conceptualized in overly isolated ways. So I end this essay with encouragement of readers to appreciate that we are not always our own best judges of our reasons for action, especially when our actions are those of participants in an online platform built to elicit more of our participation. We are not all equally free, nor will we always be if I am right that participation in indefinitely large communities online risks negatively formative and even transformative experiences. To the extent that autonomy is relational, social media users who value their own autonomy and the autonomy of others are, and should be, each other's allies in cooperative risk management.