

Spring 6-18-2023

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Recommended Citation

Kemp, Samantha, "It's a Mean, Mean World: Social Media and Mean World Syndrome" (2023). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 1302.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1333>

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It's a mean, mean world:
Social media and mean world syndrome

by
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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in
University Honors
and
Communications & Psychology

Thesis Advisor
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Portland State University

2023

Introduction & Background

First contrived by George Gerbner in the 1970s, cultivation theory is a well-known sociocultural communication theory that suggests, among other points, that television has a profound effect on viewers' perceptions of the world around them (Gerbner, 1998). Television makes it possible for audiences to consume narratives, both fictional and real, within their home at virtually any time of day with a wide variety of content to choose from. However, because of the simultaneously widespread and profit-based nature of television programming, television programs are, by commercial necessity, designed to be as appealing and watchable by as wide of an audience as possible, which creates an underlying mainstream messaging that impregnates all television programming no matter the type or genre. This is enforced further by the fact that viewership is more so dictated by the audience's availability to watch television rather than the type of programs available to be viewed; in turn, the programs that play when the most people are watching television (around 5pm after arriving home from work, for example), are inherently the most popular, and are therefore all quite similar in their content, appeal, and messaging (Gerbner, 1998). It has also been noted that in a typical U.S. household, the television is on for more than seven hours per day; active viewership averages at about three hours per day (Gerbner, 1998). The highly consistent nature of television programming coupled with near-constant exposure to television programming among the U.S. population is what makes messages delivered through television so powerful in shaping the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the audience (Shrum, 2017).

Because of this, a driving hypothesis behind cultivation theory is that there is a positive relationship between television viewership and the viewers' adoption of these underlying messages. This suggests that the more that people watch television, the more likely they are to adopt a shared conception of reality with others who watch television as much as they do, despite other ways in which they may be diverse (Shrum, 2017; Gerbner, 1998). This leads us to a primary finding of cultivation theory testing: due to the exaggerated frequency and severity of violence that appears in prime-time television programming (both fictional shows and non-fictional news), people who consume more television are more likely to believe that the real world is a more dangerous, menacing, and violent place than it actually is (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). This finding has been replicated in more contemporary research, such as a 2003 study that found that individuals who viewed more local news television programming were more likely to experience higher fear of crime and to predict a higher crime risk at both the individual and societal level (Romer, Jamieson & Aday, 2003), a 2011 study that found that television viewership was positively related to a dispositional (i.e. natural inclination) fear of crime (Custers & Van de Bulck, 2011), and a 2012 study that

found that, across ethnic groups, higher consumption of local news programming was positively related to an increased fear of crime (Callanan, 2012), among others. These repeated findings have led to the coining of a term: Mean World Syndrome, which refers to increased levels of fear, anxiety, and pessimism, marked by a perception of the world as “meaner” than it actually is due to heavy viewership of violence-related mass media (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1980).

Mean World Syndrome has primarily been associated with specifically television consumption, and consequently, a majority of the empirical research on it attempts to display a relationship between viewership of violent programming and various factors that make up how “mean” the world is perceived to be by the participant. Subsequent research has investigated this relationship with more specificity, such as how specifically news programming (and even more specifically, local news programming) promotes an increased fear of crime (Romer et al., 2003; Yamamoto et al., 2019). Others have attempted to extrapolate the relationship to other forms of mass media, such as investigating how radio programming and the Internet influence the consumer’s fear of crime (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004), how various information sources (categorized into print media, social media, and alternative news sources) differ in their influence on the consumer’s fear of violence (Näsi et al., 2020), and how social media usage promotes an increased fear of crime among young adults (Intravia et al., 2017). However, most of this work to identify the development of Mean World Syndrome as a result of consumption of media from sources other than television, and *especially* as a result of social media usage, is relatively new and non-comprehensive; recent studies have generally only researched an increased fear of violence (Näsi et al., 2020) and increased fear of crime (Intravia et al., 2017) as a result of social media usage. Mean World Syndrome is not defined solely as a fear of violence or a fear of crime – it is an all-encompassing fear, anxiety, and pessimism about the state of the world, marked by an overestimation of the cruelty of reality (Morgan, 2010). The extant research, then, calls for a comprehensive question to be asked to bring this nearly 50-year-old phenomenon into the current decade: *how does social media usage contribute to Mean World Syndrome?*

Relevance

As mentioned, research into social media’s contributions to the development of Mean World Syndrome in users is relatively lacking compared to similar research surrounding television viewership. This is understandable, considering social media has only risen to the widespread popularity we know today within the last fifteen years or so. However, despite its relative newness, the

relevance of social media as a source of information to the everyday consumer should not be underestimated. In 2015, it was reported that 65% of adults use social media networking sites, nearly ten times the amount from ten years prior (Perrin, 2015); that number has risen to 72% in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021). Over half of U.S. adults get their news from social media sites at least some of the time (Pew Research Center, 2022), compared to just 35% of U.S. adults who prefer to get their news from television (Shearer, 2021). With social media far surpassing television in popularity as an information source nowadays, it is more relevant than ever to understand the effects of it on users.

Another factor in the necessity to better our understanding of social media through the lens of cultivation theory is how the nature of social media differs so greatly from television. Social media networking sites, for the most part, operate on algorithms that work to show the user two kinds of content: content from people that they follow or are “friends” with on the platform, and content that the algorithm assumes the user might find interesting. TikTok, for example, has an infamously effective algorithm for curating each user’s “For You Page” (often abbreviated to “FYP”) which shows the user TikTok videos based on previous videos the user has watched, liked, and shared, as well as demographic information the user provides when they create their account – however, the TikTok algorithm is notoriously mysterious and kept under tight wraps (Smith, 2021). Regardless, the experience of consuming content on social media is tailored to each user, and the content consumed is reflective of other content recently consumed by each user. Because television programming is generally the same content being streamed to all viewers at the same time on any given channel (and, therefore, changing the channel is the only freedom the consumer has to choose the content they will consume), a mainstream message that is relatively moderate in terms of belief system, political view, and general attitude must be established in order to appeal to all members of a widespread, diverse audience. In contrast, social media users consume widely varied messaging based on their own individual attitudes, beliefs, and values in a far less moderated way, have an immense amount of freedom to consume specific content that appeals to the less mainstream areas of their interests (for example, expressing extremist political views that would never make it on a television broadcast), and must actively seek out differing opinions due to the curated nature of social media algorithms.

Because of this, users who interact with violent, scary, or unpleasant content, regardless of what the interaction may be (i.e. in any way other than using the integrated “don’t show me this type of content” function that is built into most social media platforms, even if their response is negative), social media algorithms will continue to promote that type of content to that user. Because violent or otherwise shocking content carries a “shock factor” that indeed

encourages users to interact with it, by either participating in a discussion about the content or even just expressing a dislike for it, this type of content does well on social media platforms in the sense that it is saved, shared, promoted, and shown to more and more users in the ensuing controversy. This type of shocking, negative content that is pushed in front of users due to its algorithmic popularity is then juxtaposed with content posted by the user's friends and family or other people the user intentionally chooses to see content from. In this way, the wide variety of content that users encounter while using social media creates a massive contrast in what a user might see from one post to the next – for instance, a user might open a social media app and see a photo of a family member's newborn baby, scroll to the next post, and see a shocking video of the carnage created by the world's most recent natural disaster. This is another reason why it is important to research the cultivating effects of social media – unlike television programming, which generally aims to acquire and hold a viewer's attention by maximizing the “shock factor” of all content that the audience sees, social media is a constant mish-mash of viral content that is oftentimes negative, violent, disheartening, or otherwise shocking, and content that is relatively normal and familiar to the user, which can have a desensitizing effect (Li et al., 2017).

The widespread, frequent use of social media as an information source in the last fifteen years has pushed social media to the forefront of mass communication studies, and cultivation theory, despite being first posited nearly fifty years ago, is a worthy framework for understanding the effect of distressing social media content on users. This, coupled with the uniquely curated nature of social media content and the echo chamber-like conditions of social media platforms that sets it so far apart from television, necessitates an investigation of how, if at all, social media inspires Mean World Syndrome in its users.

Methods

Participants

The sample (n=1303) was primarily White (n=985, 71.0%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (n=286, 21.9%), Black or African American (n=90, 6.9%), Asian (n=138, 10.6%), Indigenous or First Peoples (n=39, 3.0%), Middle Eastern or North African (n=32, 2.5%), some other race or origin (n=18, 1.4%), and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (n=10, 0.8%).

The sample was also primarily young people between the ages of 18-24 (n=963, 73.9%), followed by 25-34 year olds (n=310, 23.8%), 35-44 year olds (n=20, 1.5%), 65+ (n=6, 0.5%), 45-54 (n=2, n=0.2%), and 55-64 (n=1, n=0.1%).

Additionally, the sample mostly consisted of women (n=869, 66.7%), followed by non-binary and gender nonconforming individuals (n=288, 22.1%), and men (n=131, 10.1%).

Much of the sample was lower-income, falling into the \$0-\$30,000 annual income range (n=596, 45.7%), followed by \$31,000-\$60,000 (n=325, 24.9%), \$61,000-\$90,000 (n=171, 13.1%), \$91,000-\$120,000 (n=131, 10.1%), and \$120,000 (n=68, 5.2%).

Procedures

An online survey was conducted through the Qualtrics survey platform. Participants were recruited using two channels. The first was the Portland State University Communications student participation pool, in which instructors in the Communications department could opt-in to offer students in their classes a small amount of extra credit in exchange for their participation in the survey. The students were also invited to share the survey with others. The second channel was social media – the IRB-approved recruitment materials were shared on the researcher’s social media profiles, which allowed them to be reposted by friends and followers of the researcher. This resulted in a combination convenience and snowball sampling method.

An incentive was offered in order to encourage more participants to take the survey. Ten fifty dollar e-gift cards were raffled to ten randomly-selected participants. In order to be entered into the raffle, participants were required to fill out a separate Google form at the end of the survey. After the survey was closed, the researchers used a random number generator to select ten numbers between 1 and 776 (the total number of participants who filled out the raffle form). The form responses that matched these randomly-selected numbers were identified and the attached emails were contacted to notify the participants that they had won a gift card.

Additionally, another incentive was offered to the participants who were recruited through the PSU Communications student participation pool. As mentioned above, instructors in the Communications department were able to opt-in to the pool in order to offer a small amount of extra credit to students in their classes in exchange for their participation in the survey. The instructors were asked to determine how much extra credit the students would receive. Then, a researcher provided IRB-approved recruitment materials either through a digital flier or by visiting opted-in classes to speak in-person about the survey. Students who completed the survey by an instructor-specified deadline *and* filled out a separate extra credit form at the end of the survey were given the amount of extra credit promised by their instructor. Students who received extra credit were also eligible for the e-gift card raffle. Students who did not want to participate in the survey were allowed to complete a short alternative assignment to receive extra credit without taking the survey, and students who were in multiple classes that

offered extra credit and wanted to claim extra credit for more than one class were allowed to do so by completing the alternative assignment as well.

The survey was opened on March 1st, 2023 and closed on April 16th, 2023. In total, 1502 participants took the survey. To clean the data, responses that were not complete were removed, as well as participants that took less than two minutes to complete the survey or more than sixty minutes to complete the survey. This resulted in the exclusion of 199 participants, resulting in a final sample size of 1303 participants.

Gift card recipients were contacted on April 24th, 2023 and given two weeks to respond before a new form response would be selected.

Measures

The survey began with an informed consent page that instructed the participant to read it fully and then select whether they did or did not consent to be surveyed. If they did not consent, they were not allowed to take the survey. If they consented, they proceeded to the rest of the survey, which consisted of four sections of four to five questions each. For a full list of the survey questions used, please refer to the Appendix at the end of this paper.

The first section gauged the respondent's level of fear by borrowing from Etopio & Berthelot's Fear of Crime Scale (2022), meant to gauge their fear of crime, fear of random violence, and fear of victimization. A list of statements were provided with an agreement scale, and included items like "I'm afraid of a crime happening to me." These measures were found to be highly reliable ($\alpha = .800$), so they were combined into a single "Fear" index ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .888$).

The second section gauged the respondent's level of anxiety by utilizing questions from the PROMIS anxiety scale (Pilkonis et al., 2011) to inquire about their day-to-day anxiety level, and their anxiety as it relates to common subjects of upsetting social media content, such as natural disasters, war, and generally the current state of the world ("doom and gloom" content). A list of statements were provided with an agreement scale, and included items like "I am worried about what is going on in the world right now." These measures were also found to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.715$) so they were also combined into a single index, the Anxiety Index ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.761$).

The third section gauged the respondent's general level of pessimism, which borrowed questions from the Mean World Index (Rubin et al., 1994), which includes three questions asking the respondent's opinions on whether other people are altruistic, fair, and trustworthy. Questions included things like "Generally, people I don't know are fair and do not have intentions to be deceitful, dishonest, or to trick others." An additional question was added by the researcher to inquire about the respondent's perceptions of the world around them, which was: "The

world is a scary and dangerous place.” The first three questions in this section were reverse-coded to assure respondents’ scores indicated a positive relationship with pessimism (i.e. a higher score indicated that the respondent was *more* pessimistic). It was then found that combining these measures into a single index produced an index with adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.750$). However, when only the first three measures were combined into a single index, the reliability was slightly higher ($\alpha = 0.812$). Therefore, only the first three measures were included in the “Pessimism” Index ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.862$).

After responding to these questions gauging their fear, anxiety, and pessimism levels, respondents were presented with a series of questions to assess their social media usage. These questions investigated their overall social media usage measured in hours per day, as well as what platforms they used most and what platforms they preferred to use. The social media platforms included were Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and “Other.” Additionally, respondents were also asked how often they encountered scary or unsettling content on social media. The first measure, indicating how many hours per day the respondent spends on social media, was used to determine participants’ social media usage. Participants responded to this question using a sliding scale ranging 0-16+ hours per day. It was found that on average, participants were on social media for about 5 hours per day ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 2.52$).

Lastly, participants were asked a series of demographic questions about their age, race, gender identity, and annual household income.

Results

Hypothesis 1 stated “social media usage will be positively correlated with fear.” A Pearson correlation was run to assess the relationship between social media usage and fear. The correlation was weak, positive, and significant ($r=0.096$, $p<.001$).

Hypothesis 2 stated: “Social media usage will be positively correlated with anxiety.” A Pearson correlation was run to assess the relationship between social media usage and anxiety. The correlation was weak, positive, and significant ($r=0.100$, $p<.001$).

Hypothesis 3 stated: “social media usage will be positively correlated with Pessimism.” A Pearson correlation was run to assess the relationship between social media usage and pessimism. The correlation was weak, positive, and significant ($r=0.175$, $p<.001$).

Post-Hoc Analyses

While the correlations between social media use and fear, anxiety, and pessimism were all positive and significant, they were fairly weak, with all $r <$

0.18. Additional analyses were conducted to investigate additional variables of interest.

To assess whether the *type* of content viewed on social media mattered, additional correlations were ran to assess the relationship between fear, anxiety, and pessimism and the following survey item: “in your experience, how often do you encounter violent, scary, unsettling, or otherwise unpleasant content on social media platforms?” Participants answered using a frequency scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all the time) ($M=3.3$, $SD=0.90$). This item appears to be measuring a unique component of social media use compared to the social media use measures, as the two items were only weakly (though significantly) correlated ($r=0.139$, $p<0.001$).

Seeing troubling content on social media was significantly and positively related to all three constructs, including fear ($r=0.252$, $p<0.001$), anxiety ($r=0.362$, $p<0.001$), and pessimism ($r=0.130$, $p<0.001$). Compared to social media usage, seeing troubling content had a stronger correlation to fear and anxiety, but a weaker correlation with pessimism.

Additionally, to assess whether personal experience with crime was an important factor, independent sample two-tailed t-tests were run to assess the relationship between fear, anxiety, and pessimism and the following survey item: “Have you been the victim of a crime in the last year?” Participants could answer either “Yes” ($n=170$, 13%) or “No” ($n=1130$, 86%). Participants who indicated they had been the victim of a violent crime in the last year had significantly higher levels of fear ($M=3.77$, $SD=0.834$) compared to those who have not ($M=3.59$, $SD=0.893$). Similarly, victims of a violent crime in the last year had significantly higher levels of anxiety ($M=3.93$, $SD=0.705$) ($t=2.175$, $p<0.05$) compared to those who have not ($M=3.79$, $SD=0.768$) ($t=2.175$, $p<0.05$). There was no significant difference between those who had been a victim of a violent crime ($M=2.81$, $SD=0.870$) and those who had not ($M=2.69$, $SD=0.861$) for feelings of pessimism.

Finally, those who had been a victim of a violent crime in the last year were also more likely to report viewing troubling content on social media ($M=3.46$, $SD=0.871$) compared to those who had not ($M=3.27$, $SD=0.903$) ($t=2.611$, $p<0.01$).

Discussion

While the effects of social media on users’ psychosocial experience is moderately well-studied from a psychological perspective despite the relative newness of social media platforms, there has been less investigation into how communication theory, more specifically cultivation theory, might serve as a vehicle to understand the effects social media usage may have on its users. This

lack of consideration for the value of cultivation theory as a framework for understanding social media may be due to its original intended purpose of understanding the effects of television viewership; it may be seen as too far of a leap to extrapolate it to the metaphorical Wild West of social media. However, following a major societal shift away from television consumption and an astronomical increase in social media usage in the last fifteen years, it is becoming increasingly important to understand social media's effects on its users (Perrin, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2022; Shearer, 2021). While cultivation theory as a whole has been explored as an option for understanding social media's effects, studies that utilize it are generally quite limited in scope; recent studies have only investigated social media's relationship to fear of violence and fear of crime (Näsi et al., 2020; Intravia et al., 2017). Additionally, the specific phenomenon of Mean World Syndrome, a well-documented phenomenon borne from the study of cultivation theory which initially suggested that increased television consumption results in increased fear, anxiety, and pessimism, has not yet followed in its parent theory's footsteps and has not been clearly identified to have a positive relationship with social media usage as compared to its original application to television viewership.

Thus, the purpose of this research was to identify, superficially, if there are any correlative relationships between social media usage and the three pillars of Mean World Syndrome: fear, anxiety, and pessimism. In our investigation, we indeed found significant positive relationships for all three of these variables. Despite their relative weakness, these positive correlations imply that increased social media usage is indeed associated with increased fear, anxiety, and pessimism. It is important to note that these are strictly *correlations*, and are not necessarily causative in nature. Fear, anxiety, and pessimism are complex psychological phenomena that occur for a litany of reasons and are influenced by just as many social and environmental factors, and are therefore not solely predicted by social media usage or solely caused by it. However, the positive correlations identified in this study give reason to investigate each relationship in more depth in order to elucidate exactly *how* social media and fear, anxiety, and pessimism are related.

Despite the primary intention of this research being to identify these broader correlations, we also noted in our post-hoc analysis a positive relationship between each of these three variables (fear, anxiety, and pessimism) and exposure to unsettling content on social media, *separate* from overall social media usage. This implies that, regardless of how many hours per day one may spend on social media, the *type* of content the individual engages with is related to the user's psychological experience. This is consistent with prior research on television viewership, in which it has been identified that due to the exaggerated frequency

and severity of crime and violence in both fictional and non-fictional television programming, people who consume more television (and especially those who consume television content that is violent or otherwise troubling, such as local or global news reports on violence, crime, and disaster) are more likely to assume that the real world is more dangerous, menacing, and violent than it actually is (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Additionally, we noted that individuals who indicated they had been the victim of a crime in the past year had significantly higher levels of fear and anxiety which, unequivocally, could be attributed to ensuing trauma or discomfort caused by experience with crime. However, interestingly, these individuals who reported having been the victim of a crime in the last year were more likely to report being exposed to troubling social media content. This supports observations made in prior research (and by users themselves) regarding social media algorithms: to improve engagement, personalized social media algorithms promote content to users that they may find interesting, relevant, or in alignment with their views, regardless of whether that content is helpful or harmful to their overall wellbeing (Cinelli et al., 2021; Patro et al., 2018).

Another point of interest spawning from the construction of our study's measures was a discrepancy found in respondents' pessimistic beliefs. The survey section intended to assess levels of pessimism consists of four statements that respondents were instructed to indicate their level of agreement with. The first three of these statements assessed the respondent's pessimistic beliefs about other people, including: "Generally, people I don't know are fair and do not have intentions to be deceitful, dishonest, or to trick others." The fourth statement assessed their perception of the world around them, stating: "The world is a scary and dangerous place." When creating an index by averaging the scores of responses to these four statements, we found that including the fourth statement made the index less reliable, indicating that respondents' pessimistic beliefs about other people were inconsistent with their perception of the world around them. Interestingly, this inconsistency was because respondents were actually significantly less pessimistic about other people ($M = < 2.82$) than they were about the world around them ($M = 3.69$).

Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research

Many of the limitations of this study are related to the participant pool. Firstly, the participants were very young, with 98% of the sample being 18-35 years old. Additionally, the majority (66%) of the sample identified as women, and 71% of the sample reported an annual household income of under \$60,000. Future research could aim to identify if groups that were underrepresented by this study experience social media differently. However, it is worthy to note that this study did have an atypically large representation of nonbinary participants (22%)

as well as non-white participants (29%), which perhaps makes it more comprehensive than prior research on the same or similar topics.

Another major limitation of this study is its broadness. As stated in the discussion, the primary intention of this study was to identify any correlative relationships between social media usage and Mean World Syndrome. Positive and significant relationships were identified for all three pillars of Mean World Syndrome, but these were purely correlational and relatively weak. It may be important to this discourse, then, to identify what other factors influence people's psychosocial experience of social media and to conduct more in-depth and nuanced research to investigate how these relationships may be, if at all, causative in nature. While there is theoretical precedent for why and how exposure to unsettling content inspires fear, anxiety, and pessimism in consumers (albeit these foundations exist mostly for television consumption rather than social media), it is imperative that a *causal* relationship be empirically identified for social media before applying the findings of this study or any similar studies to any kind of formal discussion about the psychological, social, and ethical implications of social media usage.

Similarly to the study's broadness in terms of its goals, this study only investigated relationships between the three factors of Mean World Syndrome and social media usage *generally*; it did not aim to investigate differences in users' experiences based on usage of specific social media platforms or variance in social media usage behaviors, such as active usage (using social media and liking, commenting, and otherwise interacting with social media content) versus passive usage (using social media without interacting with content). Future research could aim to elucidate how specific differences in social media usage separate from the overall amount of time one spends on social media might exacerbate or alleviate users' experience of Mean World Syndrome.

A final limitation of this study was the methodology used to collect data, which was entirely self-reported. In addition to participants' social media usage being self-estimated, participants' responses to the survey questions were entirely subjective. For example, when responding to the statement about whether or not they had been the victim of a crime in the last year, the threshold for what is considered a "crime" may vary widely depending on the respondent. Those who have been victimized by crime more frequently in their lives may be desensitized to what is considered a "crime" and therefore answer "No" if they had experienced a relatively mild and non-violent crime in the past year; meanwhile, somebody who has less experience with crime may respond "Yes" if they had been experienced the same exact crime in the past year. Future works should aim to collect more standardized data; social media usage could be standardized by

providing participants with an hours log and instructing them to record their social media usage over a period of time.

Conclusion

The research outlined in this paper aimed to identify any correlative relationships between Mean World Syndrome and social media usage, based on the theoretical framework created by George Gerbner's cultivation theory. We found significant positive correlations between all three pillars of Mean World Syndrome (fear, anxiety, and pessimism) and social media usage, indicating that increased social media usage is related to an increase in each of the aforementioned three factors. These correlations serve as a worthy foundation for future research into more nuanced examinations of how social media affects users' psychosocial realities, and this research as a whole supports the argument that it is becoming more and more necessary to better understand social media's effects on its users as social media continues to grow in global popularity and influence.

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Appendix

I. FEAR

1. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: I'm afraid of a crime happening to me.
 - Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
2. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: I feel vulnerable to becoming the victim of a crime.
 - Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
3. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: I am afraid I will be harmed by a random act of violence in my day-to-day life.
 - Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
4. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: In my day-to-day life, I take precautions to keep myself safe from crime and violence.
 - Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
5. Yes or No: I have been a victim of a crime within the last year.
 - Yes
 - No

II. ANXIETY

1. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: I feel anxious in my day-to-day life.
 - Strongly disagree

- Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
2. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: I am worried about what is going on in the world right now.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
3. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: I feel anxious about the possibility of a natural disaster.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
4. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: I feel anxious about the possibility of war.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
5. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: In the last year, I have made a lifestyle change after learning about something scary going on in the world right now.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree

III. PESSIMISM

1. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: Generally, people I don't know are fair and do not have intentions to be deceitful, dishonest, or to trick others.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree

- Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
2. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: Generally, people I don't know are trustworthy, safe, and do not intend to sabotage or harm others.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
3. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: Generally, people I don't know are good, altruistic, and want to see others succeed.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
4. Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: The world is a scary and dangerous place.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

1. How many hours per day do you *actively* use social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, etc.?

(Sliding scale)

0 hours	2 hours	4 hours	6 hours	8+ hours
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2. What are your preferred social media platforms? (Select up to three.)
- a. Instagram
 - b. Twitter
 - c. Facebook
 - d. TikTok
 - e. Snapchat
 - f. Other (please specify)

3. Please rank the following social media platforms from 1 - 5, with 1 being your MOST used platform, and 5 being your LEAST used platform.

(Rank 1 - 5)

- a. Instagram
 - b. Twitter
 - c. Facebook
 - d. TikTok
 - e. Snapchat
4. In your experience, how often do you encounter violent, scary, unsettling, or otherwise unpleasant content on social media platforms?
 - a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Often
 - e. All the time

V. DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Which age range applies to you?
 - a. 18-24
 - b. 25-34
 - c. 35-44
 - d. 45-54
 - e. 55-64
 - f. 65+
2. What is the gender identity that applies best to you?
 - a. Woman
 - b. Man
 - c. Non-binary or otherwise gender non-conforming
3. Please choose the categories that apply best to you. (Select all that apply)
 - a. White (Eg: German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc)
 - b. Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (Eg: Mexican or Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, etc.)
 - c. Black or African American (Eg: African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.)
 - d. Asian (Eg: Chinese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, etc.)
 - e. Indigenous or First Peoples (Eg: Navajo nation, Blackfoot tribe, Inuit peoples, Purépecha, Mayan, Aztec, etc)
 - f. Middle Eastern or North African (Eg: Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Moroccan, Algerian, etc.)

- g. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (Eg: Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro, Tongan, Fijian, etc)
 - h. Some other race, ethnicity or origin
4. What is your typical yearly household income?
- a. \$0-\$30,000
 - b. \$31,000-\$60,000
 - c. \$61,000-\$90,000
 - d. \$91,000-\$120,000
 - e. \$120,000+