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Final Paper

In *Software Takes Command*, Lev Manovich provides a detailed breakdown of the various components of media software. During his discussion Manovich notes that he will, “focus on media applications for creating and accessing “content” (i.e., media artifacts), cultural software also includes tools and services that are specifically designed *for communication and sharing of information and knowledge*, i.e., “social software,”” (27).

Manovich further explains that, “the examples include search engines, web browsers, blog editors, email applications, instant messaging applications, wikis, social bookmarking, social networks, virtual worlds and prediction markets. The familiar names include Facebook, the family of Google products (Google Web search, Gmail, Google Maps, Google+, etc.), Skype, MediaWiki, and Blogger. However, since at the end of the 2000s numerous software apps and services started to include email, post, and chat functions (often via a dedicated “share” menu), to an extent *all software became social software*,” (27).

Social software has only become more commonly used in our society over the years. It has provided us with the ability to have instant access to any piece of information that we choose as well as connect and interact with people from all across the world, via Skype and other social media platforms. As Manovich explains, “these and all other categories of software shift over time. For instance, during the 2000s the boundary between “personal information” and “public information” has been reconfigured as people started to routinely place their media on media sharing sites and also communicate with others on social networks,” (28).

There has been a steady increase in the popularity of communicating with others as well as the use of social media over the years, especially among the younger generations/demographic. These social media platforms have captivated and consumed society. We are constantly checking on updates from those that we follow as well as constantly updating our own personal pages to make sure that we are presenting the best possible image of ourselves that we possibly can out to the world. However, is it possible that we as a society are too enamored by these social media platforms and all that they enable us to do that we could be ignoring the effects that it has on our mental health?

There are both positive and negative effects of social media on our mental health. Some of the positive effects include the potential for humor and entertainment, identity exploration, creative expression, the sense of feeling socially connected, the ability to establish new social connections, provide opportunities for social support as well as opportunities to increase mental health awareness. In an article entitled *The Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health: Challenges and Opportunities* by Jacqueline Nesi she notes that most teens believe that social media keeps them connected to their friends. They use social media to stay in touch with their friends each day. Social media is not only good for maintaining relationships. The accessibility of social media can be used to establish new relationships with people who share similar interests. This can provide support for those who do not have similar interests to those in their schools or communities. For example, teens who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community may have difficulty establishing relationships where they live. However, online through the use of social media they are more likely to be able to find people who are similarly situated and that they can relate to. The relationships that are formed through these online communities can provide a great deal of emotional support. The benefits of social media will continue to evolve

over time. Various platforms have already begun to take steps to protect the mental health of their users. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are using screening procedures to detect signs of emotional distress and even suicide risk exhibited by their users.

The use of social media can pose a serious risk to the mental health of a young person. Some of the risks associated with the use of social media include cyberbullying and cybervictimization, increased body image concerns, increased eating disorders, social exclusion, and jealousy to name a few. Cybervictimization or cyberbullying occurs online amongst peers because peer interactions can take place more frequently, more immediately and with more intensity. People can be empowered when they are behind a keyboard and computer screen. They can say things without taking the time to reflect and to consider the potential impact it would have on the other person's feelings. The ability to view the comments of a cyberbully often empowers others to join in and make their own hurtful comments. In essence, it allows a group to gang up on an individual and continues to fuel the fire of cyberbullies. As a result of cyberbullying and cybervictimization there is an increase in self-harm and thoughts of suicide. Another risk from the use of social media is the need for appearance comparison. Users often compare themselves to the unrealistic images that they view on social media. This can lead to an increase in body image concerns as users seek to change their appearance to be more like the images they are viewing online. Constant appearance comparison can also lead to eating disorders because some users will take drastic measures to achieve the desired body image. The use of social media can create negative peer experiences including social exclusion, conflict, and drama. All of these negative experiences can put an individual's mental health at risk. A young person can have a false sense of popularity because of the quantity of friends or followers that they have on social media. However, having a large number of friends and followers does not

actually make you a more social person. The likelihood is that you may not even know all of these people personally. The use of social media may also promote jealousy among peers. Feelings of jealousy and envy may be created when you view a post from an event in the life of your peers. These posts may portray what you believe to be an “ideal” or “perfect” life that you wish you were also experiencing or living. The concept of “FOMO” has been described as the fear of missing out of rewarding and exciting experiences of others. An individual may become stressed out because of the feeling of “FOMO” which is created by the posts that they are viewing online.

Social media also provides an extremely wide range of content and gives extensive access to potentially risky information. When this content is combined with peer influence it can be a negative combination and cause a person to engage in conduct, they may not otherwise engage in. For example, content that depicts recreational drug use or the use of alcohol may influence the behavior of a social media user. Another negative aspect of social media is that online content may promote images of self-harm and suicide. This information is readily available and easily accessible to users of all ages. This ultimately impacts those who are already vulnerable and potentially struggling with their own mental health issues. Extensive use of social software can hinder the development of the necessary and important social skills. Many young people choose to engage with others online instead of in person. They no longer speak but rather text or message one another to communicate. When in person their attention is focused on their phone and not on the person that they are with. This creates socially awkward interactions which are uncomfortable and negative for everyone involved. The lack of actual in person socialization with their peers will set them back in their adult life when social skills are necessary to succeed both professionally and personally in their everyday life. The amount of time that a young person

spends using social software or on social media can have a negative affect on them. Spending too much time on electronic devices can lead to feelings of increased feelings of isolation and loneliness. These feelings can potentially increase the risk of becoming anxious or depressed. Extensive usage and exposure to social media may have an adverse effect on an individual's sleep. The more time a person spends on an electronic device equates to less time getting the required and necessary amount of sleep. Ultimately, sleep deprivation may negatively impact an individual's mental health.

The question that is difficult to answer is whether the positives of social media and social software usage outweigh the negatives of social media and social software usage. The answer is dependent upon the individual user. Social media and social software usage does not negatively impact all users. The positive or negative effect will depend upon the individual user, the purpose of its use and how vulnerable the person's mental health may be.

There needs to be a way to achieve a balance between the positive and negative effects of social media and social software usage to avoid the risk to a user's mental health. One way for an individual to protect their mental health is to limit the amount of time that they spend each day scrolling the pages and pages of online content. This will help to alleviate the constant comparison of one's image or personal situation to that of others who you perceive to be better than you or in a better place. Limiting usage will help to reduce stress and anxiety. Additionally, limiting usage will reduce the distraction caused by social media. An individual's mental health will be protected because they will no longer feel like they have to constantly engage, seek the approval of others and to consume massive information. An individual can be proactive in protecting their mental health by making conscious choices such as choosing to turn their phone or other electronic device off at a certain point in the day, disabling social media notifications

and by not bringing the phone to the dinner table or bed. An individual user can also utilize their phone features to monitor their screen time and activity and making the conscious decision to turn it off when it reaches a certain limit. Social media usage should also be intentional in order to ensure that usage is intentional a user should ask themselves why they are on the device and what is the purpose. Social media usage should be for a specific purpose not just a reflex or habit or something to scroll through to relieve boredom. Another step that can be taken to protect an individual's mental health is to make a genuine effort to have offline social interactions with friends and family. It is extremely important to put the phone or other electronic devices down and to step away from screen time to socially interact with others. These social interactions will reduce the feelings of isolation created while spending too much time on social media. Offline interactions will allow an individual to be present in the moment, promote happiness and create a real sense of social acceptance with friends and family. Taking the time to disconnect from all social media platforms will allow individuals to become more present in their own lives rather than desiring to live vicariously through the life of other's social media posts.

There is no doubt that social media and social software will continue to evolve and expand as they have become an essential part of the world that we live in today. There will be more and more content available which is more easily accessible. This ease of access will continue to put a strain on the mental health of young people. As our society engages on a discussion on mental health they will need to include topics which address the negative impact that social media and social software can have on mental health. There must be a balance between the positive and negative effects of social media and social software especially when it comes to the younger generation. If the negative effects are ignored or overlooked the mental

health of young people will potentially suffer and deteriorate. This will have a devastating impact on society.

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