To what extent and in what ways has social media changed people's lives?'

I've been told more lies by strangers in 10 minutes online than anyone in my life.

Isn't this a familiar story? A scroll through my Instagram feed reveals a curated world of perfection: friends boasting dream vacations, flawless bodies, and effortless relationships. Influencers tout miracle products, while provocative ideas and conspiracy theories make me question my reality,

However, social media has no longer been just a communication platform but more like a stage. Living in a world where reality is often staged, Ervin Goffman's dramaturgical approach serves an introspective notion. He believes members of society are social actors, playing different roles in society whether it be of a student or a friend using impression management to craft the way people perceive us. (Chapman & Kirby, 2019) Similarly, social media becomes a theater where users premeditatedly alter their performance aka posts for their audience, including followers, family, and friends. Individuals often present themselves as an idealized version of themselves to remain socially desirable. This Hawthorne effect compels people to alter, manipulate, and filter their reality to their sweet reverie. (*IConstruct*) I can confidently agree with this perspective, being a victim of it, constantly overthinking stupid little texts or editing a picture for hours, making it quintessential.

Have you ever wondered if the mere concept of having a social media account contributes to the notion that we all are living a double life? As a matter of fact, research conducted by OnePoll on behalf of Lenovo for its latest research, 'Work for Humankind' shows that about 46% of Gen Z, 27% of the millennials, 18% of Gen X, and even 8% of the Baby Boomers feel a type of duality between how they present themselves online. (*Half of Gen Z feels like they're living a double life* 2024) For instance, Bisi Alimi, the founder itself of the Bisi Alimi Foundation felt the need in the patriarchal society of Nigeria to maintain an extremely formal picture for his clients where in reality he was a binary queer man who did not conform to the societal expectations of a stereotypical 'man.' However, on his Instagram surrounded virtually by young adults, he felt more free to express himself. (*Are you living a double life on social media?* 2023)

When addressing the impact of social media, it is vital to remember the hypodermic syringe model, which is a communication paradigm that suggests media has a direct and profound influence on our lives. Harold Laswell's theory proves that information is directly injected into the minds of the passive audience, leaving us vulnerable to misinformation. (By & Perera, *Hypodermic needle theory [magic bullet theory of communication]* 2024) Similarly, in the context of social media, this theory is more prevalent than ever. During the 2014 Ebola infection epidemic, a post became popular on social media claiming that drinking or bathing in salt water might help prevent the infection from spreading. Several persons in Nigeria were killed, wounded, or hospitalized as a result of taking harmful and excessive doses of salt and bitter kola. This one outbreak of misinformation had a deadly impact on the city, which shows how influential social media can be. (Alexandra Gagliano, *Is the hypodermic needle theory still relevant in 2021?* 2021)

As the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, individuals around social media feel the need to comment on every social issue which is trending which gives rise to performative activism. While on

the outside it may seem like it's no big deal, performative activism is nothing more than a selfish urge to gain social capital which removes the attention from the issue itself and puts unnecessary spotlight on the influencers instead. Call it a cry for attention, a clout, or even a form of virtue signaling to let the world know you care, it prioritizes appearance over action offering ostensible support without driving any real change in the situation. (*Performative activism: Evaluating motives for volunteerism* 2023) I don't think there's any better example than the bandwagon buzzing the internet, '#BlackOutTuesday' followed immediately after the death of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police officers. While I don't think there is any harm in posting black squares to support the movement, out of the 28 million people who took part in this movement, only 13 million of them signed the petition. This issue of racial discrimination and oppression has been going on for more than 400 years, however, I see people care about this for a maximum of two weeks and even proceed to delete these black squares later as it might ruin the 'aesthetic'. This is just one of the many examples of the many. (Abdi, A tale of performative activism: How black lives matter became just a trend 2020) At the end of the day, if our activism is merely a fleeting post or an overlooked hashtag, who are we truly advocating for; social change or our own personal social capital? (Jennings, *Who are the black squares and cutesy illustrations really for?* 2020)

It is important to acknowledge that, like any other debate, social media also has its fair share of advantages. The context in these few years has changed, and social media campaigns, even if performative, have raised an abundance of awareness. There is no better way to explain this than not taking the very recent conflict between Israel and Palestine. Yes, my feed is flooded with countless individuals with no knowledge about the war whatsoever reposting an AI-generated picture saying, 'All Eyes On Rafah,' but even this kind of activism is crucial in today's context. When compared to the BlackLivesMatter movement with an abundance of media support, do not expect Disney to post an illustration of Mickey Mouse draped in a Palestinian flag or major corporations lining up to sponsor the 'Free Palestine' march as they scrambled their way to change their logos on BlackLivesMatter merchandise quickly. This is where the importance of this 'trend' on social media comes in, which we should welcome. Even when people are speaking up about it in the shallowest possible way, it is opening up space, creating integral awareness, and putting pressure on the authorities to address these issues. (Greig, *Can performative activism be positive?* 2024) This positive ripple effect can be explained through the network society theory by Castells which outlines how modern cultures' social systems hinge on electronically processed information networks, amplifying causes and creating public awareness on a huge scale.

Furthermore, through positive content consumption, individuals not only gain a heightened awareness of global events but also consume uplifting, aspiring, and helpful content which in the short run will assist in promoting mental well-being and foster a positive and resilient environment online contributing to communal solidarity and collective a sense of optimism. (*Social Media Awareness*) Whether it be creating a positive digital footprint connecting with your long-distance loved ones online or even finding like-minded people to gain self-acceptance, social media has proved to make the world a smaller and more connected place. (Gooden, *22 examples of the positive impact of social media* 2021) Let's take the whimsical example of Red Nose, an initiative taken by Comic Relief is a platform where famous figures have their activities broadcasted on social media for a fundraiser. Either James Corden creates a one-of-a-kind carpool episode or Ed Shereen visits Liberia's initiatives. It exemplifies

how social media can assist collect money for worthy causes in a light-hearted manner. (Vine, *15 examples of how social media helps charities spread their message* 2024)   It also demonstrates how social media, with its ease of use and widespread reach, can drive resource mobilization and build a collective conscience, emphasizing the need of shared responsibility and social solidarity in contemporary society.

I executed a questionnaire-based research to collect quantitative data from a broad set of respondents ranging in age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Although the sample size was restricted to 281 people (170 women and 108 men), the findings indicate substantial generational disparities in social media attitudes and usage. To protect the research's integrity, I prioritized participant confidentiality and anonymity by removing personal identifiers from the questionnaire, such as names and email addresses. Furthermore, I used simple and succinct wording while writing the questions to reduce ambiguity and promote honest replies. To protect participants' privacy, the qualitative data-acquiring question was made optional. This purposeful design choice enabled respondents to freely offer new thoughts, promoting a trusting and inclusive research atmosphere. The methodology's stringent attention to ethical issues and participant-centric design provide for trustworthy insights into different generations' social media perceptions and experiences. Although the ratio of male to female is unequal, after analyzing the responses individually it is clear that age is the more prominent factor compared to gender where there are few or no differences in the patterns of responses.

Have you experienced "FOMO" from social media posts?
281 responses
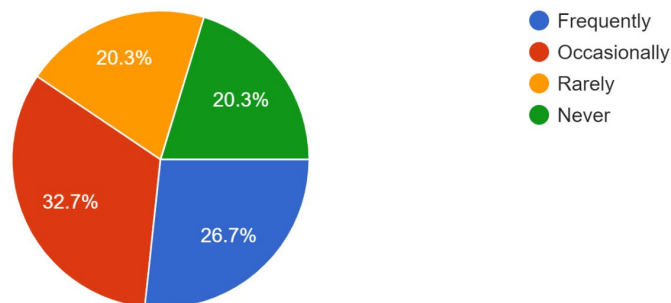
Here, it is abundantly clear that 59.4% of the respondents experience FOMO.

After personally analyzing each response sheet and taking into account the fact that the majority of my sample replies ranged in age from 35 to 60, it is reasonable to infer that middle-aged people and boomers are less prone to experience the 'Fear Of Missing Out' than youngsters. It can be concluded that while my generation constantly seeks digital validation, older people are resilient towards any online anxieties and rather embrace it as a platform to connect with others. Thus, I strongly believe that before FOMO turns into a defining personality trait of the generation rather than just an acronym, we must approach social media in a more civilized manner.

What impact, positive or negative, has social media had on your life? Please provide any additional thoughts or insights.

93 responses

Positive

Positive

.

Negative

mostly negative. i hate being on social media

It is very informative and helpful if you use it the right way

Positive, I am able to dig deep into the specific topic through search on X (formally Twitter).

This difference can largely be seen in my attempt to collect qualitative data.

Younger Participants (Below 29):

"I frequently go through FOMO by looking at what others do or how they live their lives... I feel many people my age group go through this feeling of being left out or missing out."
"It has taken a toll on my health as my physical activities have decreased."
"Made my self-esteem low."

Older Participants (Above 29):

"I follow social media for fun. No stress at all. Every impact is positive. Don't give it too much importance in life; there are better things to do and enjoy as humans!"
"To reach many people without paying anything, it has to be a little easier."
"It has facilitated communications and helped everyone connect and stay informed."

These responses suggest that, in contrast to the elderly who view social media as merely a tool for enjoyment, communication, and information, it is an anxiety-driving platform.

Concerning research, the influence of social media differs significantly based on age group. While excessive social media usage has been related to negative mental health outcomes in teenagers, it appears to have a positive impact on older folks. SeniorNews discovered a substantial 33% reduction in depression risk among seniors. (Bitner, *How dangerous is social media to seniors' well-being?* 2020) According to Yale Medicine research, American kids aged 12 to 15 who spend more than three hours per day on social media are twice as likely to develop depression, anxiety, and other detrimental mental health effects. (Katella, *How social media affects your teen's mental health: A parent's guide* 2024)

To conclude about this crucial agent of socialization; social media, I recall this quote inspired by Max Weber, 'Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun.' Don't you think social media is one of the most intricate webs woven, intertwining us between countries and notions but at the same time caging us with a constant battle with ourselves, our self-esteem, comparison, and validation? I can say on behalf of my generation that growing up in such a digitalized society means that we are constantly balancing; connection and isolation, reality and deception, and awareness and apathy. So the question isn't limited to *how social media impacts* us but instead, *how can we influence its impact.* Will we always be caught up in these 'webs of significance' spinning around or will we be bold enough to show our authentic and raw self? Social media has changed us in innumerable ways; nevertheless, the final test will be how we respond, whether we let it define us or take charge and define it for ourselves.

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Appendix A

Social Media Survey

B *I* <u>U</u> 🔗 ✕

This survey aims to understand behaviors and attitudes of individuals towards social media. Your responses will provide valuable insights into the impact of social media on daily life, relationships and self-perception.

Age

- ⚪ Under 18
- ⚪ 18-29
- ⚪ 30-45
- ⚪ 45-60
- ⚪ 60 and above

Gender

- ⚪ Male
- ⚪ Female

How many hours do you spend on social media (on an average) *

- ⚪ Less than 1 hour
- ⚪ 1-2 hours
- ⚪ 2-3 hours
- ⚪ 3-4 hours
- ⚪ More than 4 hours

Do you feel safe concerning your own privacy when using social media? *

- ⚪ Very safe
- ⚪ Somewhat safe
- ⚪ Neutral
- ⚪ Somewhat unsafe
- ⚪ Very unsafe

Have you ever adopted an online persona different from your real-life self? *

Have you ever adopted an online persona different from your real-life self? *

◯ Yes, frequently

◯ Yes, occasionally

◯ Rarely

◯ Never

Do you feel more confident expressing opinions on social media? *

◯ Yes

◯ No

Have social media comments changed your real-life behavior/opinions? *

◯ Yes, frequently

◯ Yes, occasionally

◯ Rarely

◯ Never

Has social media helped discover/express hidden talents? *

◯ Yes

◯ No

Has social media helped discover/express hidden talents? *

◯ Yes

◯ No

Do you feel more connected to friends/family through social media? *

◯ Yes

◯ No

Have you experienced "FOMO" from social media posts? *

○ No

Have you experienced "FOMO" from social media posts? *

○ Frequently

○ Occasionally

○ Rarely

○ Never

On a scale of 1-10 how often do you compare yourself with others on social media? *

○ 1

On a scale of 1-10 how often do you compare yourself with others on social media? *

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4

○ 5

○ 6

○ 7

○ 8

○ 9

○ 10

Has social media changed your self/other perception due to "highlight reels" *
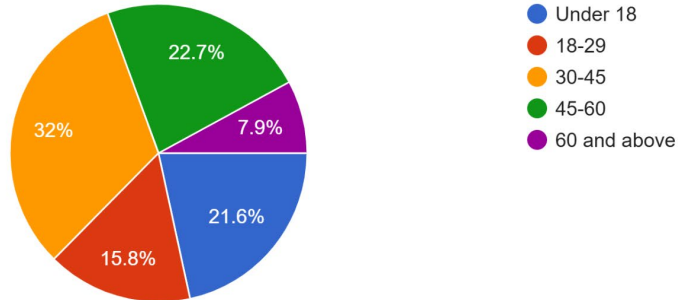
○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

What impact, positive or negative, has social media had on your life? Please provide any additional thoughts or insights.

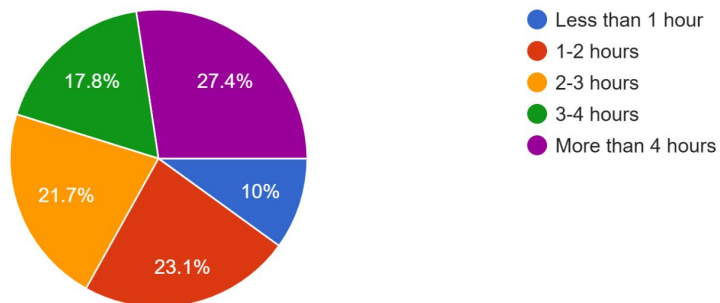Long answer text
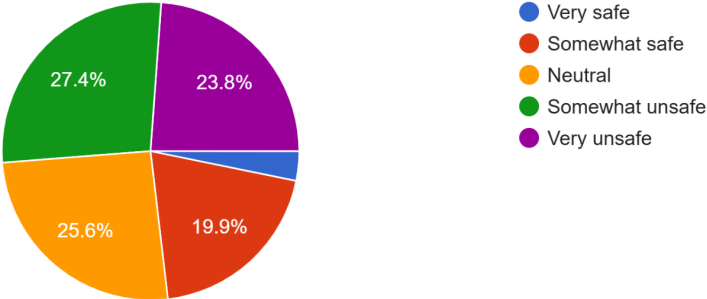
Appendix B

Age
278 responses

- ● Under 18
- ● 18-29
- ● 30-45
- ● 45-60
- ● 60 and above

22.7%
7.9%
32%
21.6%
15.8%

Gender
278 responses

- ● Male
- ● Female

61.2%
38.8%
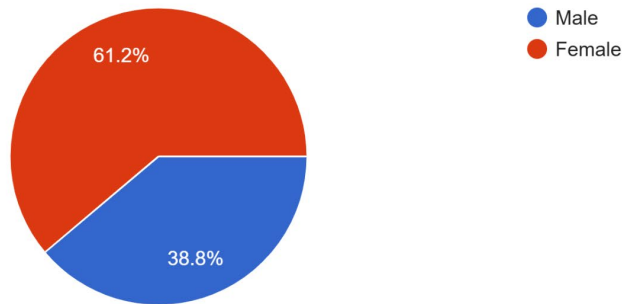
How many hours do you spend on social media (on an average)
281 responses

- ● Less than 1 hour
- ● 1-2 hours
- ● 2-3 hours
- ● 3-4 hours
- ● More than 4 hours

17.8%
27.4%
21.7%
10%
23.1%

Do you feel safe concerning your own privacy when using social media?

281 responses

- Very safe
- Somewhat safe
- Neutral
- Somewhat unsafe
- Very unsafe

27.4%   23.8%
25.6%   19.9%

Do you feel safe concerning your own privacy when using social media?

281 responses

- Very safe
- Somewhat safe
- Neutral
- Somewhat unsafe
- Very unsafe

27.4%   23.8%
25.6%   19.9%

Have you ever adopted an online persona different from your real-life self?

281 responses

- Yes, frequently
- Yes, occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

31.3%
23.5%
19.6%
25.6%

Have you ever adopted an online persona different from your real-life self?
281 responses

- 🔵 Yes, frequently
- 🔴 Yes, occasionally
- 🟠 Rarely
- 🟢 Never

31.3%
23.5%
19.6%
25.6%
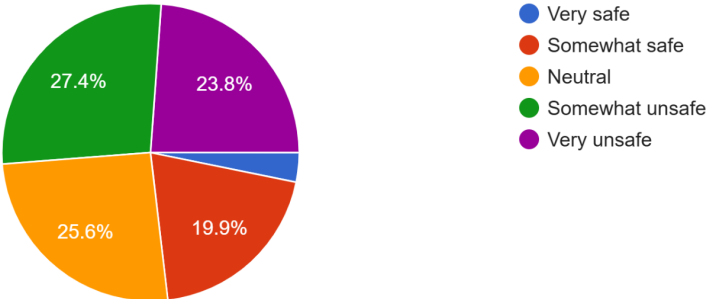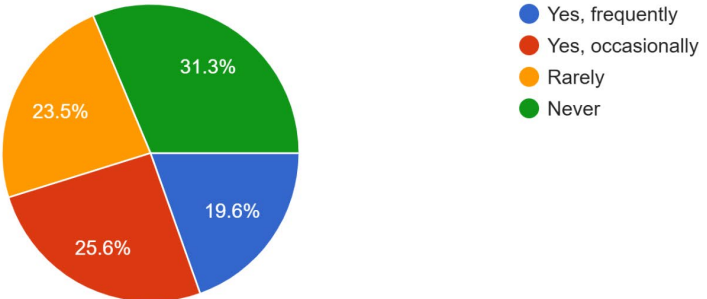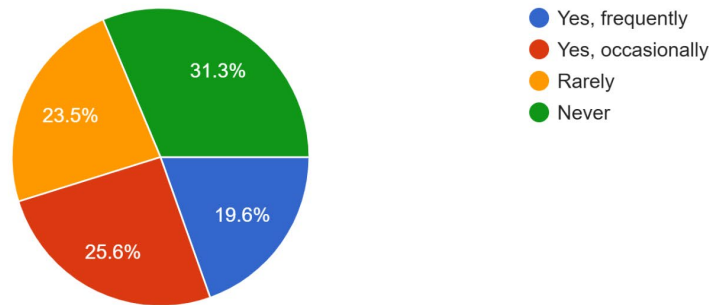
Do you feel more confident expressing opinions on social media?
281 responses

- 🔵 Yes
- 🔴 No

49.5%
50.5%
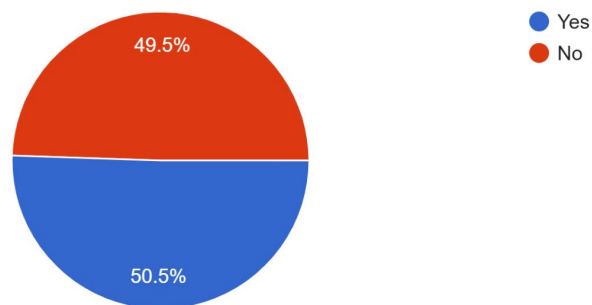
Have social media comments changed your real-life behavior/opinions?
281 responses

- 🔵 Yes, frequently
- 🔴 Yes, occasionally
- 🟠 Rarely
- 🟢 Never

26.3%
19.6%
32%
22.1%
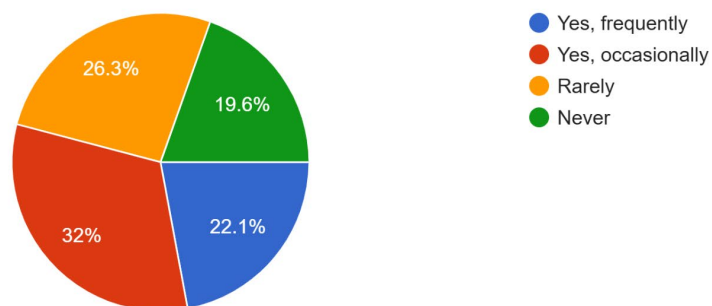
Has social media helped discover/express hidden talents?
281 responses
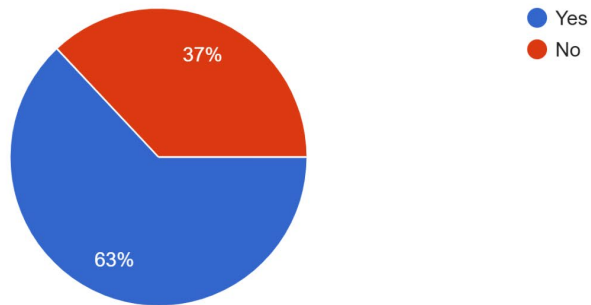
Legend:
- Yes
- No

63%
37%

Do you feel more connected to friends/family through social media?
281 responses
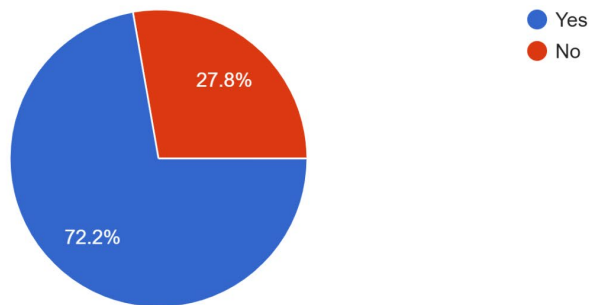
Legend:
- Yes
- No

72.2%
27.8%

Have you experienced "FOMO" from social media posts?
281 responses

Legend:
- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

20.3%
20.3%
32.7%
26.7%
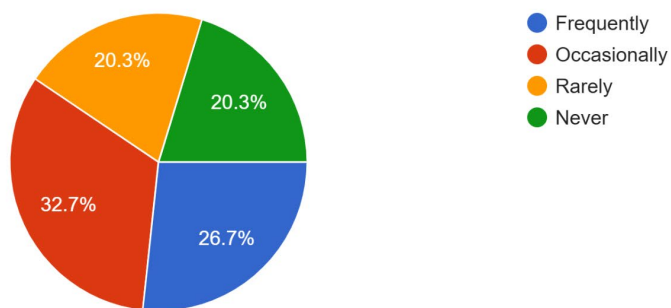
Has social media changed your self/other perception due to "highlight reels"

281 responses
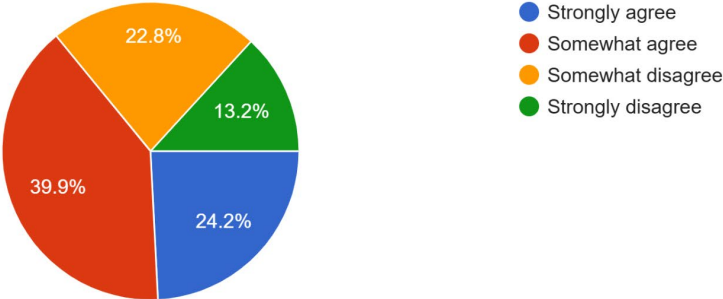
●	Strongly agree
●	Somewhat agree
●	Somewhat disagree
●	Strongly disagree

22.8%
13.2%
39.9%
24.2%

On a scale of 1-10 how often do you compare yourself with others on social media?

281 responses

●	1
●	2
●	3
●	4
●	5
●	6
●	7
●	8

△ 1/2 ▼

23.1%
11%
16.7%
13.5%

What impact, positive or negative, has social media had on your life? Please provide any additional thoughts or insights.

93 responses

Positive

Positive

Negative

.
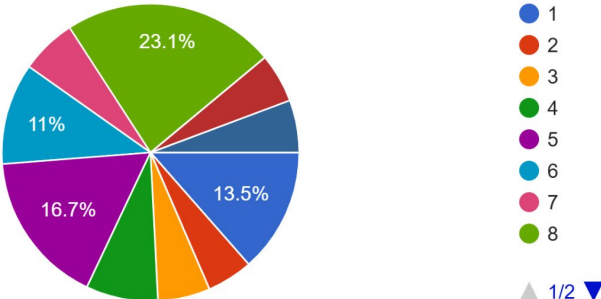
mostly negative. i hate being on social media

I follow social media for fun. No stress at all. then every impact is positive. Do not give it too much importance in life, there are better things to do and enjoy as humans :)

I indulge into mindless reel scrolling at times. Consciously try to change that habit.

I follow social media for fun. No stress at all. then every impact is positive. Do not give it too much importance in life, there are better things to do and enjoy as humans :)

I indulge into mindless reel scrolling at times. Consciously try to change that habit.

more of neutral, the experience on social media has been helpful yet vulnerable for me

Not much

I was able to find about new things especially news that aren't highlighted on news channel etc

Negative impact is that once you start watching reels, it's a never ending process.Time flies very fast. Positive impact is that I got to know about various things which iwere difficult to search about. It becomes easy to have a peep in about various types, just on one click.

What impact, positive or negative, has social media had on your life? Please provide any additional thoughts or insights.

93 responses

As a retired man, social media has helped me reduce my boredom as it always intrigues me in various ways also since my grand kids are on these platforms it easily allows me to remain connected with them however as i am not technologically savvy, i feel like i might be at higher risk of being hacked or scammed so i do try to remain cautious

In some cases positive & in some cases Negative

It's totally fake

I quite social media but the truth is it depends on what type of content people absorb. It's different for all but social media does drain engery and decreases authentic creativity in my opinion.

It has given great paltform to connect with people.. but at the same time it is very time consuming...

Gotten me close to my family and friends

Made my self esteem low

Helped me find recipes

i hate myself because of social media. i may want to die

idk girl

Both positive & negative

Negative &positive both

Negative impact as alot of time is been wasted

Poseitivr

To reach to many people without paying anything, it has to be little more easy

Mostl negative. It can be habit forming which is not what I personally want. Too many fake posts and stories makes social media untrustworthy. Misinformation and lies can affect a community immensely which makes social media a dangerous platform and I believe it should be held legally liable.

If few likes to certain posts shows same reels continuously. It hampers mind.

social media is really helpful if you use it mindfully and is also very harmful if you get addicted to it…so choose wisely and update yourself

Social media has not affected my life much, I only follow cool recipies or go to suggestions

I find it a complete fake and artificial life which can be depressing later. So i dont use it.

Positive impact as it is upto us how to use it wisely

It has facilitated communications and has helped everyone connect and stay informed

Good

Today social media is surely more impactful in terms of knowledge sharing . More outspoken . It really depends on how it impacts to oneself positive or negative depending on what you see on social media.

The most positive thing social media has taught me is how my time is worth more and I should focus on educational platforms

More social awareness about what is happening around the world

Social Media brings awareness.. it's a platform to express yourself....!!!

Negative as it eats your time

Both

Positive ...come to know about current affairs, knowledge, new place, many more

Sicual media is a good platform but should be used rightly

It has taken a toll on my health as my physical activities have decreased

Both positive and negative

Positive and negative both same

No major impact other than getting in touch with contacts

It has helped me connect with my friends from childhood but we each keep our distance too

Helps me to know what is happening around the world

Neutral

Time pass

Mixed

Some what positive

It is very informative and helpful if you use it the right way

I take it positively. I get a chance to learn about various ppl from different backgrounds

social media has definitely affected me in a negative way as my self esteem has gone down

Both positive as well as negative

Negative impact

Its neutral sometimes positive nd sometimes really disturbing

It feels like something motivation for a longer period of time which often have changed my perspective for life.It also helped to change my life by making a life goal achievable.

No comment

Social media is good but don't consider it true only as it too passes on wrong info

Positive: Marketing opportunity, educational resource, building community, employment opportunities, entertainment, brand building etc..,disadvantages: time management & addiction, privacy concern

It has both negative and positive aspects I feel positive aspect that we can connect to everyone instantly and the negative side is that one person can disrupt his life because of it

We have to just take information from it.
But have to do what our heart says

Positive if used in right way

I am not a social media person

...

Has increased waste of time on social media and provide some additional at a huge cost of time

Positive when good information is being shared by others which is very helpful at times

Too much time consuming without any productive result

Positive, I am able to dig deep into the specific topic through search on X (formally Twitter).

It is negative because everyone is constantly watching mobile