Social media? It's serious! Understanding the dark side of social media

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ABSTRACT

Research and practice have mostly focused on the "bright side" of social media, aiming to understand and help in leveraging the manifold opportunities afforded by this technology. However, it is increasingly observable that social media present enormous risks for individuals, communities, firms, and even for society as a whole. Examples for this "dark side" of social media include cyberbullying, addictive use, trolling, online witch hunts, fake news, and privacy abuse. In this article, we aim to illustrate the multidimensionality of the dark side of social media and describe the related various undesirable outcomes. To do this, we adapt the established social media honeycomb framework to explain the dark side implications of each of the seven functional building blocks: conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, groups, and identity. On the basis of these reflections, we present a number of avenues for future research, so as to facilitate a better understanding and use of social media.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, social media have been transforming how individuals, communities, and organizations create, share, and consume information from each other and from firms. What appeals to almost 90% of the younger EU citizens (Eurostat, 2017a) is how social media differ from traditional media (e.g., newspaper and television) in terms of their reach, interactivity, usability, and ubiquity. In 2017, users spent more than 2 hours on average per day on social networks and messaging services (half an hour each day longer than five years earlier), which amounted to about one third of their entire daily computer time (Mander, 2017).

Many studies have touted the advantages that social media would bring to individuals and firms (e.g., Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016; Sabate, Berbegal-Mirabent, Cañabate, & Lebherz, 2014; Wagner, 2017). They highlight the "bright side of social media" and how engagement between firms and consumers is being democratized (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). For firms, this means social media would improve marketing, public relations, customer service, product development, personnel decision-making, and other business activities that rely on information exchanges and engagement with consumers and employees. Many of these advantages have materialized, thus leading almost 50% of all EU firms to use at least one form of social media in 2017 (Eurostat, 2017b). These firms use social media to not only broadcast company content but also track sentiment worldwide by analyzing user-generated content (Paniagua, Korzynski, & Mas-Tur, 2017), consumer-generated intellectual property (Berthon, Pitt, Kietzmann, & McCarthy, 2015), and interactions on social networking sites (Wagner, Baccarella, & Voigt, 2017), to adjust their business and marketing strategies appropriately.

Regardless of the numerous opportunities social media offer, an increasing number of incidents demonstrate that there is undoubtedly a "dark side" to social media. Chamath Palihapitiya, a former Facebook executive, recently stated that he regrets that some of the tools he has helped to create "are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works" (Wong, 2017). This quote vividly illustrates how the qualities that underlie the enormous presence of social media platforms are now also undermining the freedoms and the well-being of the individuals and communities they serve. For example, there have been an increasing number of reports and research attention into concerns such as cyberbullying (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), trolling (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Hardaker, 2010), privacy invasions (Pai & Arnott, 2013), fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; European Commission, 2018), online

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firestorms (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014), and addictive use (Blackwell, Leaman, Tramposch, Osborne, & Liss, 2017). Furthermore, a 2017 survey found that Britons aged 14—24 believe that social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, exacerbated self-consciousness and "fear of missing out" (Przybylski, Murayama, Dehaan, & Gladwell, 2013), which can result in increased levels of anxiety, sleep loss, and depression (e.g., Levenson, Shensa, Sidani, Colditz, & Primack, 2016). In the workplace, a recent study found that the benefits of social media also come with negative consequences through work-life conflicts and interruptions that increase exhaustion (van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegenthart, 2017).

Even with social media executives admitting that their platforms have deleterious impacts, users tend not to question the short- and long-term implications and potential risks of their choices. Many company employees and customers now belong to a generation of digital natives who have grown up with social media, rather than first learning to use these technologies as adults (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). Most adult users, too, have become so accustomed to social media that the types of conversations, self-expression, community building, and other forms of online engagement are now parts of the only reality they know. It is therefore of utmost importance to take a step back to reflect on how we have arrived at the present and what our most recent social media "advances" might mean for us in the future.

In this article, we draw attention to the duality of social media: for the many bright sides of social media, there are also dark sides that are worthy of being investigated so that we become more conscious of their potential risks and make better-informed decisions. We begin by clarifying what we mean by the dark side of social media, and why it is a concern for society. We then introduce a framework for understanding the dark side of the core functionalities of different social media platforms. By using the ideas and issues that this framework highlights, we then outline a number of important research opportunities that could help in facilitating a healthier use of the "media" by better understanding their related negative impact on the "social" fabric of society.

2. The darkness of social media

With the expression "dark side," we highlight that social media like many phenomena, including fast food (Schlosser, 2002), entrepreneurship (Beaver & Jennings, 2005), capital markets (Scharfstein & Stein, 2000), crowdsourcing (Kietzmann, 2017; Wilson, Robson, & Botha, 2017), and the sharing economy (Malhotra & van Alstyne, 2014), can have negative or detrimental consequences on society that are worthy of research attention. However, it is important to recognize that social media are not good *or* bad, helpful *or* unhelpful, black *or* white, and bright *or* dark. The consequences of many technological innovations, intentional and unintentional, are usually not dichotomous, but simultaneously have both bright *and* dark sides. When Alfred Nobel invented dynamite in 1866, he called it "Nobel's Blasting Powder." It significantly improved mining, quarrying, and construction, but of course, it also "improved" warfare when armies realized the weaponized potential of dynamite explosions. In a similar duality, we use social media to connect to our far-away friends, *and* at the same time, we disconnect from those who sit across the table from us. Importantly, these new types of engagement have long-term implications. The "shallowing hypothesis," for instance, suggests that certain types of social media activity (e.g., sharing and conversing) lead to a decline in ordinary daily reflective thinking and instead promote quick and superficial thoughts that can result in cognitive and moral triviality.

With social media, the degree of brightness or darkness is often

a subjective matter. When Rachel Burns in the UK posted a photo on Facebook of her singalong activity with residents at the care home at which she worked, she joined the many others who have been fired for a sharing faux-pas (Karl, Peluchette, & Schlaegel, 2010; Schmidt & O'Connor, 2015). While she, the people in the photo, and likely much of the UK public thought the posting was well intentioned and harmless, her employers saw it as a breach of privacy rules. In the end, the Facebook posting cost Burns her job, after 21 years of service. In contrast, few would argue with the intense darkness of the case of Britain's Richard Huckle, who created an online leader board and awarded himself and others "pedopoints" for sharing original and new recordings of sexual crimes against minors on social media (Wolak, Liberatore, & Levine, 2014). The degree to which perpetrators are aware of the nature of their actions varies, too. Cyberbullying may be a way to intentionally harm individuals, while oversharing photos of positive experiences unintentionally causes anxiety among those who live lives less glamorous. Moreover, some actions require technological savvy (e.g., gamification of criminal behavior and hacking), whereas others rely on the use of blunt tools (e.g., posting videos online).

As the attraction, use, and impacts of the bright side of social media can be studied and understood using a multidimensional honeycomb framework based on seven social media building blocks (Kietzmann et al., 2011), the impacts of these dimensions on society can also be dark, separated by various shades of gray. Thus, to understand how social media can also lead to undesirable outcomes for individuals and communities, we now employ this framework in the next section of this paper.

3. The dark side of the seven building blocks of social media

To understand how individuals, communities, and organizations can use different social media platforms to connect, monitor, and engage with each other, Kietzmann et al. (2011) developed a honeycomb framework. This framework unpacks social media functionalities into seven building blocks (see Fig. 1) to describe different features of the social media user experience and the extent to which different social media are driven by each functionality. These functionalities refer to the extent to which users can (i) converse with each other, (ii) share content, (iii) let others
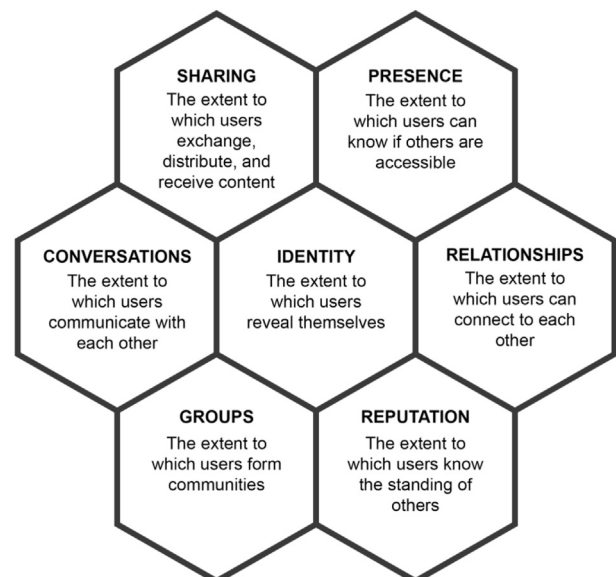
Fig. 1. Social media functionality (Kietzmann et al., 2011).