

Opinion Guest Essay

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Gen Z Has Regrets



Was social media a good invention? One way to quantify the value of a product is to find out how many of the people who use it wish it had never been invented. Feelings of regret or resentment are common with addictive products (cigarettes, for example) and addictive activities like gambling, even if most users say they enjoy them.

For nonaddictive products — hairbrushes, say, or bicycles, walkie-talkies or ketchup — it's rare to find people who use the product every day yet wish it could be banished from the world. For most products, those who don't like the product can simply . . . not use it.

What about social media platforms? They achieved global market penetration faster than almost any product in history. The category took hold in the early aughts with Friendster, MySpace and the one that rose to dominance: Facebook. By 2020, more than half of all humans were using some form of social media. So if this were any normal product we'd assume that people love it and are grateful to the companies that provide it to them — without charge, no less.

But it turns out that it can be hard for people who don't like social media to avoid it, because when everyone else is on it, the abstainers begin to miss out on information, trends and gossip. This is especially painful for adolescents, whose social networks have migrated, since the early 2010s, onto a few giant platforms. Nearly all American teenagers use social media regularly, and they spend an average of nearly five hours a day just on these platforms.

So what does Gen Z really think about social media? Is it more like walkie-talkies, where hardly anyone wished they had never been invented? Or is it more like cigarettes, where smokers often say they enjoy smoking, but more than 71 percent of smokers regret ever starting?

Our survey shows that many Gen Z-ers see substantial dangers and costs from social media. A majority of them want better and safer platforms, and many don't think these platforms are suitable for children. Forty-five percent of Gen Z-ers report that they "would not or will not allow my child to have a smartphone before reaching high school age" and 57 percent support the idea that parents should restrict their child's access to smartphones before that age.

This high level of support is true across race, gender, social class and sexual orientation, and it has important implications for the House of Representatives, which is considering just such a bill, the Kids Online Safety Act. The bill would, among other things, disable addictive product features, require tech companies to offer young users the option to use non-personalized algorithmic feeds and mandate that platforms default to the safest settings possible for accounts believed to be held by minors.

Social-media platforms serve as communication platforms, which means any reforms must respect First Amendment protections; the House measure seeks to do this by focusing on what content is being recommended to kids through their algorithms, not on what kids are posting or searching for. But even so, imagine if walkie-talkies were harming millions of young people. Imagine if more than a third of young people wished that walkie-talkies didn't exist, yet still felt compelled to use them for five hours every day.

If that were the case, we would take action. We'd insist that the manufacturers make their products safer and less addictive for kids. Social media companies must be held to the same standard: Either fix their products to ensure the safety of young users or stop providing them to children altogether.

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