"Social" Media: Disrupting our ability to be a Cosmopolitan

Consequential effects on our mental health and psychological well-being

Payton Hodson

CC 325-A: Encountering Others

Professor Prough

November 23rd, 2020

I. <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

Our contemporary social world is becoming increasingly virtual, in the age of evolving technology and globalization; we are more connected to people than ever before. Although a virtual world allows us to build networks, connect remotely, and improve communicative efficiency, we lose direct interpersonal relationship experience by isolating ourselves behind a screen. It is important to look at philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*, which addresses these questions regarding the need for intercultural human interaction. Appiah posits that since we live in a world of strangers, conversations across cultures are necessary to understand one another and effectively live together, but is this inhibited through social media? Ultimately, social media disrupts our ability to follow cosmopolitan ethics due to the reality of diminished encounters: certain groups of people are naturally over- or under-represented online, which creates a non-inclusive narrative of our social world and suppresses non-dominant voices, in the name of profit and growth of the platform. Furthermore, this media "connectivity" can be harmful to mental health, insofar as it contributes to depression, anxiety, cyberbullying, low self-esteem, addictive behaviors, and damaging self-thoughts. Given our increasing lack of direct encounters with others in a media-saturated era, it is critical to analyze how social media interactions intersect with building an effective global society on a large scale and whether this predicts detriments in individual mental health and psychological well-being on a small scale.

In this interdisciplinary paper, first I will provide context by describing social media, specifically the platform Twitter that I will analyze in this essay. Then, I will explain Appiah's theory of cosmopolitanism and his two primary ethics, followed by his three primary ways we can disagree. The bulk of my paper will engage with how our contemporary means of intercultural communication, social media, inhibits our ability to be a cosmopolitan and

1

negatively impacts mental health. I will utilize examples of disagreements on Twitter surrounding women's reproductive rights and climate change to illustrate how social media encounters are divisive, exclusive, polarized, and do not foster understanding, representative of Appiah's cosmopolitan society. Ultimately, social media fosters unhealthy relationships and thinking patterns as we derive our sense of identity from these virtual interactions and enact social comparisons, consequential on our mental health and well-being on an individual level. We need to strive for cosmopolitan conversation and understanding, in order to effectively live together in our globalized world and overcome our disagreements and differences.

II.   <u>CONTEXT: SOCIAL MEDIA AND TWITTER</u>

Social media are online interactive, bidirectional, virtual social networks that facilitate communication and information sharing across the globe. People express themselves through social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, or LinkedIn, and view posts, from strangers to loved ones, friends, and celebrities. Social media networks and platforms have both personal and public communication facets that are always available and are socially acceptable methods of interaction (Warrender). Whether it is for the purpose of entertainment, career-building, activism, branding, advertising, networking, or keeping in touch, the breadth and depth of social media is continually and rapidly evolving.

For the sake of this essay, I will use example conversations from the social media platform Twitter, which I will paraphrase for anonymity and brevity. Twitter exemplifies social media, since users can post, interact with, and express their opinions on threads of short messages called "tweets," on any topic of their choice. Twitter is a unique platform in this online public sphere, since as Brandie M. Nonnecke—PhD in Mass Communication and Founding Director of the CITRIS Policy Lab at UC Berkeley—outlines, "(1) all tweets are public by

default; (2) hashtags enable the formation of conversations around a shared topic, enabling individuals to easily find, follow, and contribute to a conversation; (3) retweeting enables rapid sharing of information throughout a network; and (4) because Twitter does not require reciprocal connections" (Nonnecke). Twitter supports various aspects of small-scale and large-scale communication, from interpersonal to international dialogues. José Van Dijck, Professor of Comparative Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, elaborates that this strong global connectivity simultaneously fosters an economical source of income for the company and may actually be exploiting users, since not everyone is equally influential (Van Dijck 68).

Regarding the content that is published by users on Twitter, these "tweets" have an 140 character limit, chosen for its conciseness and technical compatibility with hand-held mobile devices (Van Dijck 70). However, for this exact reason, tweets may "work best to convey affective content, both in terms of gut-fired opinion and spontaneous reactions" (Van Dijck 77). It is a question of the quality of these tweets, in whether they contain essential information, or rather are intended to be solely conversational or even controversial. Short messages may be difficult to interpret—working best to communicate emotion-oriented messages—suggesting that users have the power to dominate markets and exert influence on others. This lack of depth to explain an opinion or idea in only 140 characters may contribute to why Twitter is often the platform for virtual battles over controversial issues, termed "Twitter wars". These contemporary "conversations" are becoming more prevalent for virtually encountering others around the world.

Twitter has manifested itself as a user-centered site and an autonomous brand, purposefully adapting its hardware and software to fit multiple services and increase its possibilities for use on a global scale. In 2011, "CEO Dick Costello began to call Twitter an "information network" rather than a "social networking service" to signal the company's move

toward the connectivity approach" (Van Dijck 79). They regarded themselves as "a general conduit for communication traffic", while various outside companies tested out services in their marketplace that have profitable intentions (Van Dijck 81). Twitter was created with the idea of supporting "an echo chamber of random chatter" for the collective sharing of information, which will empower citizens and groups to express their opinions and gain awareness and attention on a public stage (Van Dijck 69, 73). In other words, Twitter is largely a platform for interaction with others and the world, conceptualized as a global stream of unmediated, public consciousness.

As features of Twitter have proliferated since its creation in 2006, its social practices evolved, such as liking, friending, favoriting, trending, and following, which create for a more diverse social experience but are also competing factors. This expansion of Twitter has forced a balance of technological adjustments with "modifications in user base, content channeling, choices for revenue models, and changes in governance policies and ownership strategies" (Van Dijck 86). In 2008, the addition of "trending topics" gave users an option to group posts together with a hashtag sign with certain designating phrases. This development allowed users to engage in current communal conversations and respond to other's posts and comments in particular threads or dialogues they are interested in (Van Dijck 69-71). Yet, the trending topics feature mobilizes and normalizes the public mood and its interactions with others, instead of a free stream of communication. Promoted Tweets/Trends can exploit Twitter's connectivity when a trending topic is paid for by a sponsor that expands the business' commercial potential (Van Dijck 72). To continue to attract customers and users, Twitter then needs to comply with country- and company-specific legislation to stay in business, which can conflict with its own policies regarding users' rights to freely express themselves (Van Dijck 85). In 2009, Twitter began to encourage users to conversationally tag one another through retweeting—"users reposting

interesting tweets from their friends using the letters RT followed by the @ sign and a user name" (Van Dijck 71). This popular function also enhances connections between users around the world, but meanwhile it can exclude smaller voices.

On this note, a drawback of Twitter as a social media site is that it has a hierarchical structure where its users are not all equally influential and represented. Demographically, Twitter users are mostly young, active individuals who see the potential for collective efforts to influence the public dialogue (Van Dijck 73). They recognize that the platform can be an instrument to manipulate mass opinion through a gain in followers and tweet volume by the retweeting and following functions. In 2009, "a small but prolific group of 10% of Twitter users accounted for over 90% of tweets . . . influence is not gained spontaneously or accidentally, but through concerted effort such as limiting tweets to a single topic" (Van Dijck 74). By Twitter constantly filtering information, the content of popular influencers with many followers and great Tweet volume are what is expressed, viewed, and discussed. Influential Twitter users can utilize the platform as an indispensable tool for benefit and profit, at the detriment of other voices. In summary, Twitter's goal of being a voice for all does not pan out that way, since its strong connectivity can divide users and under-represent smaller voices in mass social threads.

III.   <u>FRAMEWORK THEORY: APPIAH'S COSMOPOLITAN ETHICS</u>

In his book, *Cosmopolitanism*, Appiah proposes that in order to live together in a world with billions of strangers, we need to follow two strands of the ethical notion cosmopolitanism: first, we have an obligation to others that stretches beyond kith and kin, and second, we have to respect the value of particular human lives (Appiah xv). Instead of following cultural relativists who believe every culture has their own truths, or following cultural imperialists who present their culture as correct, a middle path between these two alternatives are cosmopolitans who

posit that we can learn from our differences and they are worth exploring. Therefore, Appiah emphasizes that conversation between people from different ways of life is both inevitable and vital in local and global intercultural encounters. The goal of conversation is not to persuade others or to reach an agreement; rather, we need to enter each conversation openly to seek an understanding (Appiah 72, 44). Appiah argues that humans naturally strive to build on what we have in common to initiate these difficult cross-cultural conversations (Appiah 96). A constraint Appiah acknowledges is that not everyone will be a cosmopolitan, but we have to allow this individual difference. In the end, exposure to other ways of life through conversations are what matters in our communal lives, following the cosmopolitan ethic. Inevitably, universal concern and respect for individual differences will clash and we will disagree on values, especially across different world cultures. Appiah wants our global community to move past these discordances and live together, by virtue of our shared humanity. We should aim for this ethic by engaging in cross-cultural dialogue, because conversations are the way to build a stronger understanding and effectively live together. Even though moral disagreements may happen, it is still possible to agree on what to do, without various people sharing the same justifying reasons. By emphasizing our shared humanity and world, we can bridge our differences and get used to one another.

Therefore, if we are to engage in cosmopolitan conversations across differences, we must expect disagreements. In this essay, I will emphasize Appiah's three ways we can disagree about values—failing to share a value language, interpreting our shared value vocabulary differently, and disagreeing on how much relative weight should be put on different values—particularly how this plays out through the contemporary virtual medium of social media, since it is how we "encounter others" in the modern day. The goal of conversation is to understand, appreciate, and respect diverse ideas. So, does social media as a communication platform allow us to be a

cosmopolitan, as Appiah prescribes, or is it an unrivaled challenge? Furthermore, what impact does this have on our mental health and psychological well-being that we should be aware of?

First, the most fundamental type of disagreement Appiah claims we can have is a failure of shared language regarding values. In other words, one party does not have the concept of a certain value in their cultural vocabulary that which another party does. This disagreement leads to a struggle in initial understanding, without a shared common ground. Appiah explains that "there are thin, universal values . . . but their expression is highly particular, thickly enmeshed with local customs and expectations" (Appiah 49). Hence, how and where we grew up plays a significant role in what particular concepts and values make sense to us and that influence the decisions we make and actions we do in our individual lives.

In addition, even if we have shared values, we can disagree by interpreting our shared vocabulary of values differently. Cultures apply common value language differently in their particular cases. For example, across cultures we can agree on the value of raising well-behaved children, but we can disagree on whether forms of physical discipline are tolerable means to this end. As Appiah summarizes, "grasping what the words mean doesn't give you a rule that will definitely decide whether it applies in every case that might come along" (Appiah 58). Even people who use familiar language can disagree about how it works in interesting situations. This is not because one party does not understand the value language; rather moral language is disputable across cases. Application of shared values and morals to new circumstances "requires judgement and discretion. Indeed, it's often part of our understanding of these terms that their applications are meant to be argued about" (Appiah 59). Language is essentially difficult to define precisely, especially across cultures and conditions. Ergo, a shared vocabulary does not necessarily mean a shared understanding or agreement on application (Appiah 60).

Finally, even if we share a common language of values and agree on how to apply them, we can disagree about how much relative weight should be put on different values, depending on the situation (Appiah 63). These conflicts amongst shared values can occur between different cultures, between different people within a culture, or even within a person's individual moral and ethical codes in themselves. For example, different people may disagree regarding whether complex tax laws are just practices, especially since you could still end up getting charged a penalty after receiving reputable assistance: "Most people will agree that there is something unfair about punishing people for doing something that they couldn't have been expected to know was wrong . . . the question is whether it's unfair enough to change the law" (Appiah 65). People disagree on how much weight should be given to enforcing tax laws—which is a value we hold—while also recognizing they are hard to understand and honest people of integrity may be unaware of their faults. To sum up, in the following sections I will apply how Appiah's three ways we can disagree (failing to share a value language, interpreting our shared value vocabulary differently, and disagreeing on relative weight) is amplified through social media, specifically on the case examples of women's reproductive rights and climate change conversations on Twitter. These disagreements will illustrate how social media encounters are divisive, exclusive, and do not foster a cosmopolitan understanding of others and respect for differences as Appiah wishes.

IV. <u>WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS</u>

The first example of a disagreement on Twitter that I will analyze surrounds the issues of women's reproductive rights, which will segue into how these virtual encounters through social media are divisive, exclusive, polarized, and do not foster mutual understanding—they are not representative of Appiah's cosmopolitan society. To give background, women's reproductive rights have been strategically manipulated as political tools in the media by both parties to

strengthen partisanship, as well as sow divisiveness regarding the subject (Nonnecke). Typically, Democrats are associated with "pro-choice", while Republicans are associated with "pro-life"; religiously, Christians are typically pro-life, because the Sixth Commandment states you shall not murder. Pro-life activists may use graphic images of aborted fetuses in campaigns, while pro-choice activists may depict images of deceased women from unsafe abortions to relay their points (Nonnecke). Furthermore, "abortion" itself is conceptually debated and not defined unanimously: Is it a right? Is it birth control? Is it murder? Without a shared common ground of language, abortion conversations quickly escalate and divide. Social media plays an integral role in these conversations, since alleged arguments may influence the public sphere: "With facts left unchecked, unconfirmed claims on social media have the potential to gain momentum and influence state and federal law" (Nonnecke). As Nonnecke points out, Twitter is known to "influence political homophily, group cohesion, and polarization" by manufacturing and promoting an illusion of consensus on the issue, even though there is no concord (Nonnecke).

For example, a Twitter War this year exploded after a graphic video featuring an aborted human fetus was posted, along with the caption "Abortionist holds head of his 20-week-old victim", which has been viewed over 240,000 times and retweeted nearly 2,000 times. In the thread, we see pro-life statements such as "the court [should] order these women to get fixed so they don't have the right to murder innocent children", coupled with pro-choice tweets claiming the video is fake (Nonnecke). The two sides disagree on the grounds of language, or Appiah's fundamental way we can disagree. A pro-life bot account responded to the opposition with "what you're saying is that you want women to have the right to kill an unborn child as a form of birth control. You call it abortion, I call it murder. God calls it murder" (Nonnecke). Both polarized groups do not share a common language to engage in meaningful, reciprocal conversation. Upon

further analysis, tweets shared false information, which exacerbated polarization while also shaping people's viewpoints. Tweets claimed Margaret Sanger (founder of Planned Parenthood) "established the organization to engage in race-based targeting of abortion" and others reported "fetal tissue collected from Planned Parenthood is sold for a profit" (Nonnecke). These disinformation campaigns were eventually dismantled by experts, who revealed the video was edited to omit this false information about Planned Parenthood's intentions perpetuated by pro-life advocates, but the damage was done already in terms of public opinion. Additionally, pro-choice tweets tended to call to party loyalty, causing further divide between political parties: "You're only a true Democrat if you support pro-choice" (Nonnecke). Pro-choice sentiments also referenced Congress members and targeted Justice Brett Kavanaugh (pro-life) by calling for a resistance against him (Nonnecke). Pro-life tweets emphasized the immoral side of abortion and spread disinformation, while pro-choice tweets focused on political separation and polarization.

As for the results of the study on Twitter threads surrounding women's reproductive rights, Nonnecke et. al. found that social media encounters foster "computational propaganda" tactics (the manipulative spread of disinformation) which leads to harassment and divisiveness, rather than Appiah's cosmopolitan understanding (Nonnecke). Twitter users know that an ideal cosmopolitan society we should strive for involves an obligation to and respect for others to create mutual understanding and transparency, but they are choosing not to follow these ethics. Instead, users exploit social media to spread false and alienating information for their benefit, in terms of the debate over women's reproductive rights. Overall, "while pro-life bots were more likely to send and retweet harassing language, pro-choice bots were more likely to perpetuate political divisiveness by promoting politically charged content" (Nonnecke). Twitter users and bot accounts were observed to spread disinformation, harassment, and divisiveness related to

women's reproductive rights, primarily manipulated by the two polarized sides termed pro-life and pro-choice. These extreme, yet widely disseminated, views may not be authentic, as we saw through the disinformation campaigns on this particular thread (Nonnecke). Social media perpetuates the polarization of pro-life and pro-choice, without considering that people may hold opinions in a middle realm, nor establishing a common ground of shared language to initiate effective conversation. Hence, we see a divisive nature in abortion debates: The content that is posted and spread are short Tweet messages of ambiguous language that are politically-charged and emotionally-charged, which subsequently become the main arguments on the forefront of abortion conversations. Initially people fail to share a common language of this issue to provide a common ground for meaningful interchanges, which is Appiah's fundamental way that we can disagree. Twitter users retweet information from these polarized sides, increasing their media presence and influence on others, while also excluding other relevant voices that are not on the extreme sides of pro-life or pro-choice. This divisiveness, coupled with harassment language, fosters a lack of understanding of others, separating groups and hampering cosmopolitan efforts.

V.   <u>CLIMATE CHANGE CONVERSATION</u>

Another common disagreement on Twitter surrounds the issue of climate change, which is a similar example in that it will supplement how social media encounters divide, exclude, and do not foster mutual understanding of a cosmopolitan society, as discussed in the prior section. Unlike women's reproductive rights conversations that tend to illustrate a lack of a shared value vocabulary and definition of important terms, climate change dialogue emphasizes Appiah's second and third primary ways we can disagree—we disagree how to interpret and apply these common values in the world, and how much weight should be put on them in different situations. Various people use Twitter to influence the climate change conversation, such as scientists,

politicians, journalists, world leaders, and activists (Swain). Although some people may be skeptical of the evidence, or some may use other terms (such as global warming or climate variability) to describe it, overall most people agree that long-term changes in weather patterns have led to a broad range of consequences and that we need to act to preserve our shared world. Thus, we have a common vocabulary of values to initiate meaningful conversations, but we disagree on what we should do in response and which proposals should be weighted more. Some tweets—such as one by Narendra Modi during the COP21 climate conference in Paris—promote that wealthier countries with resources must take responsibility for climate change and take action, since poorer countries cannot (Swain). Others argue that people everywhere should take steps to reduce their carbon footprint on an individual level and on an institutional level, using a more adaptive approach. More natural solution proposals include reducing greenhouse gas emissions and conserving land and water resources at the national and local levels. However, we need global collaboration to make a change. Hidden behind our screens, we are blinded to the realities of other areas of the world and new possible solutions to our shared problems.

For example, a Twitter War illustrates how climate change influencers vary over time and depend on current events, even if a person may not be the most reliable source. Data Scientist John Swain published compiled data on the Twitter climate change conversation in terms of common clusters of influencer activity (people who can affect the opinions and behaviors of others), which revealed how popular influencer's posts at the time spread their effects across the globe. In 2016, actor Leonardo DiCaprio won an Oscar, citing climate change in his acceptance speech: "Beyond humbled by this recognition. #TheRevenant shows the beauty of nature. Help protect it" (Swain). The event was referenced by other highly influential users (the White House, GreenPeace, and the United Nations) who agreed with DiCaprio's message in their posts,

generating a large volume of tweets (Swain). Leonardo DiCaprio was the most prominent Twitter user on the map during this period, along with others who "would not normally be influential on the subject" (Swain). It is important to acknowledge some contributions may only comment on the Oscar win and DiCaprio's acceptance speech, which we need to balance and evaluate when making decisions about who is influential on climate change. Social media can become "a tool that specific players can use in social and political conflict towards their own ends", given their unequally prominent representation in the media (Couldry 102). In this case, Leonardo DiCaprio is part of the population of people who are close to the media process, termed celebrities, who are overrepresented and become the conversation topic in worldwide media discourse. Even without factual grounding, social media and institutions of high power and influence, like the government, create this illusion of a consensus in public discussions based on what is continually circulated amongst these celebrities (Couldry 103). People who may not have expertise in the subject, but are popular celebrities in the media, can be largely influential and the reference point in global politics, which can dangerously shape public opinion and subsequent legislation.

Notably, there was also a high presence of a small group of identifiable users engaging in this conversation who shared skepticism about climate change, termed "deniers". A story posted by Allen West generated the Twitter reaction: "Witch hunt: Look what Obama admin is planning for climate change "deniers"" (Swain). This conversing group was isolated from other influential users on the Twitter map, geographically and in the virtual world. These people "rarely retweet or converse with people outside of their tribe" and are "rarely ever retweeted or mentioned by people outside of their tribe", in a sort of echo chamber (Swain). Social media threads tend to become polarized, solely emphasizing the two extreme sides of an issue, coupled with ignorance of opinions across the continuum. Controversial claims are more likely to be "retweeted" or

"liked" which increases their media presence—but typically isolated within that particular public sphere where they comfortably share opinions, with little interaction between polarized sides.

This Twitter conversation on climate change epitomizes how through social media, we are not fully engaging with other countries and with people of different viewpoints to understand why people may use and interpret our shared value language in unique ways, since groups of people may be isolated based on their beliefs. Popular influencer's posts at the time spread their effects across the world, which shapes the network of encounters and limits the scope of voices being heard (Swain). This "influence", or ability to affect others' behaviors and opinions, is a phenomenon that can be measured particularly on Twitter, even though it is subject to cognitive bias (Swain). Communities that share interests tend to frequently interchange ideas, but rarely with others who hold different opinions. In other words, social media is impeding our ability to be a cosmopolitan, because we are failing to take other people's perspectives into consideration with our own during these virtual encounters; thus we are not fulfilling our moral obligations to others. On a similar note, we are not respecting individual differences when conversations are polarized and exclusive of everyone's voice from equally being heard. By disagreeing on and being shaded from others' viewpoints regarding how we should apply these shared values to reverse climate change, social media is impeding Appiah's cosmopolitan conversation efforts.

VI.   <u>ANALYSIS: WIDESPREAD CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA</u>

Up until this point, I have described how social media encounters are polarized, divisive, and exclusive, fostering unhealthy connections between people and inhibiting understanding to build Appiah's cosmopolitan society. The media contributes to social knowledge in a significant way, yet it is not a coherent picture. Nick Couldry, Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths University of London, emphasizes the widespread consequences of social media, in

that it has the capability to shape and hardwire certain values and discourse in our everyday

lives. Couldry states social media portrays "certain dimensions, categorical features and 'facts'

that disable alternative accounts of the world and so themselves get embedded, *by default*, in

everyday actions and understandings" (Couldry 84-85). When certain types of information are

posted by influential users during specific time periods, and is subsequently commented on,

reposted, liked, and continually circulated in public discourse, a particular account of the world

is formed while other viewpoints are unheard. Essentially, there is an inequality between what

values and ideas become part of the global conversation. Not all voices are heard even if they are

on Twitter, because it takes repetitive commenting and reposting to increase its media presence

and its influence on others' thoughts and opinions. As Couldry argues, "where media maps of

'what is' *conflict* with other powerful maps . . . a *denaturalization* of those other maps may result

. . . where media maps of 'what is' *coincide* with other maps . . . the result is an *intensified*

naturalization, or what we might call a 'hard-wiring', of certain values, distinctions and

exclusions into cultural, social and political discourse" (Couldry 85). Media maps are driven by

influential users at that moment, typically on polarized sides of debates. This leaves a permanent

gap between what social media presents of our world and what is actually happening, since

everyone's voices are not equally influential or even heard in online spheres (Couldry 91).

To sum up social media's potent influence on our daily lives, it is its symbolic power, or

the capacity to "intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to

create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms" (Couldry 87).

Contemporary media institutions have such great concentrations of symbolic power that they can

dominate our social knowledge and landscape of conversation, as emphasized previously. Social

media contains this sense of constructing our reality, because the industry can enact exclusionary

efforts in what voices are heard, posted, and spread in global discourse. Thus, the media's symbolic power is inherently divisive, even if we think we are discovering and building on commonalities during virtual encounters. The prominent inequity "between those with access to the media's vast concentrations of representational power and those without such access" separates whose voices and what content is actually heard in the social media sphere (Couldry 89). There is an evident divide of insiders and outsiders in social media conversations, which is non-inclusive and does not accurately represent our society (Couldry 99). Not everyone has an equal opportunity to express their voice and be a part of this supposedly universally accessible echo chamber. Hence, the media shapes the social world by "making [these] other potential 'socials' invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable" (Couldry 102). Concentrations of social media's symbolic power illuminate certain influences and shade others. As discussed in the climate change section previously, there are populations of people who are close to the social media process who are susceptible to overrepresentation in media attention and become the reference point in global media discourse, at the cost of others who are not. These hidden agendas and structural forces at play in the media shape the social dialogue and actions.

Ultimately, humans have an innate desire to narrate and tell their stories. We wish to exchange our experiences with others to build connections and establish our sense of identity. However, in attempting to engage with others on social media, we face these conflicting institutional processes—their "concentrated power over narrative production" and influence on whose voices are and are not publicized (Couldry 93). Even worse, there are risks associated with narrating your story and this inherent symbolic power of the social media industry: "The abstract division that underlies media power's hidden injuries becomes actualized as direct and public pain" (Couldry 95). Our global connectedness through virtual platforms is simultaneously

a realm of public criticism, which one risks confronting if they choose to share their voice. Therefore, reconfiguring the media and our society to be more inclusive, representative, and fostering an understanding of others would be complex, needing "a much larger transformation than tens of thousands of 'ordinary people' appearing in our television" (Couldry 97). A cosmopolitan society that encourages an understanding of one another and respects individual differences and stories is prevented by contemporary social media that amplifies particular voices at the cost of exploiting and inhibiting others. The institutionalization of social media has led to their control of who and how people can self-narrate, rather than us individuals as autonomous, genuine users of online social communication platforms.

VII.   <u>DETRIMENTS IN MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING</u>

Thus far, we have seen, through examples of disagreements on Twitter surrounding the issues of women's reproductive rights and climate change, how encounters through social media are divisive, exclusive, and polarized, which inhibits building Appiah's cosmopolitan society. Ultimately, social media fosters unhealthy relationships and thinking patterns as we derive our sense of identity from these virtual interactions and enact social comparisons with others. In this section, I will examine how these effects are consequential on our individual mental health and psychological well-being. Although this idea is not inherently apparent in cosmopolitanism (which is more of a social ethic), it elaborates on how social media encounters are also detrimental to individuals, which in turn negatively affects our ability to engage in mutually respectful conversations with others. Dan Warrender, a lecturer in mental health nursing at Robert Gordon University, published a crucial psychological study analyzing how social media affects how we view ourselves, others, and encounter other posts without in-person interactions. Overall, there is growing evidence of the connection between greater social media use and higher

depression and anxiety, poor sleep, low self-esteem, and body image concerns, particularly in adolescents (Warrender). Social media "may be a vehicle for distress in those with unhelpful patterns of thinking", as mental health challenges are maintained through "interactions between environment, thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical sensations" (Warrender). There is a dynamic interplay between the virtual world of social media and our real-world experiences, where we tend to use media platforms as a "social validation feedback loop" (Warrender). This tendency encourages us to continue to view these sites for self-acceptance and justification.

Furthermore, social media increases our vulnerability to make upward social comparisons, resulting in self-criticism and other negative effects on mental health. Defined by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954, social comparison is a form of sociological self-esteem, where we derive our sense of self and identity through comparing ourselves with others. While the term and phenomenon has been around for a long time, social comparison tends to be prevalent through contemporary social media. Festinger argued "people have a tendency to make downward social comparisons with those who are worse off or less skilled than them, and this can raise their self-esteem. Conversely, upward social comparisons can reduce self-esteem, and are more likely with social media" (Warrender). The problem is that people struggle to compare themselves against anything but the best virtual representation of others (Warrender). In an unlimited digital world, as we gain more connections with others, the opportunities we have to compare ourselves against others online continually increases.

As a result of social comparisons with others through social networks, we tend to present ourselves differently, which can be optimized and advantageous when it is virtually-mediated rather than in a face-to-face conversation format. Self-presentation theory indicates that "people have discretion as to how they present themselves, in a variety of 'performances'", particularly

with social media (Warrender). We attempt to seek increasing status and social capital, but meanwhile we emphasize our likes, comments, and followers as a representation of our self-worth and derive our self-esteem from this analysis. In other words, social media plays into our relationships and behavior in the social sphere, as "the self can now be packaged as a product" that we create and share virtually (Warrender). Facets of social media such as editing tools and airbrushing allow us to, literally, present our best face online, while simultaneously covering up daily struggles with mental health or negative self-image (Warrender). Moreover, we may see and share different self-representations on social media sites, and self-discrepancy theory suggests that how we feel about ourselves depends on this gap (Warrender). As people present their best selves on social media and we engage in social comparison, we mentally create an image of an unrealistic, ideal self that we are motivated to seek. When we fail to bridge the gap between our actual self and this ideal media-induced self, we may experience dissatisfaction, disappointment, and emotional vulnerability with our self-image (Warrender). Thus, we keep making upward social comparisons, attempting to remove self-presentation discrepancies and improve ourselves, unaware that this social media-driven ideal self is really an illusion.

On a positive note, psychoeducation about the effects of social media on self-presentation and social comparison can increase understanding and expose the illusion of this ideal self that is perpetuated through social media. Increasing awareness of this false, yet very common, thought that 'other people are better than me' can help break unhelpful thinking patterns and falling into upward social comparisons online (Warrender). A feasible and positive first step to reduce the mental distress consequences of social media is to encourage a healthy balance between screen time and other beneficial activities, "such as sleep, exercise and face-to-face social interaction, which screen activity should not supersede", especially in children and adolescents (Warrender).

Another option is to reduce visibility of the "likes" feature on platforms, which is "seen as a measure of accomplishment and popularity" (Warrender). It is possible to improve life satisfaction, positive emotions, healthy body images and self-images, and ideas of self-worth by taking a break from social media, or at least limiting exposure. If social media companies used their power in a different way, these societal and individual issues could be avoided. Social media could be a positive tool to foster cosmopolitan conversation if it was structured to allow for equal contributions that were heard, understood, appreciated, and respected by everyone. Current social media encounters are inherently divisive and exclusive, leading us to make upward social comparisons that have various determinants on psychological well-being. These patterns are inhibiting our ability to reach a cosmopolitan global society on a broader social scale, as well as on an individual level by negatively impacting mental health, consequently limiting our ability to build an understanding of and healthy relationships with others.

VIII.   <u>CONCLUSION</u>

In conclusion, our contemporary means of intercultural communication, social media, disrupts our ability to follow Appiah's cosmopolitan ethics—we have a moral obligation to others, as well as a call to respect individual differences—due to unequal representation of people online, which creates a non-inclusive narrative of our social world and suppresses non-dominant voices. We should be striving for this ethic by engaging in cross-cultural dialogue, because conversations, beyond kith and kin, is the way we can build a stronger understanding of one another and learn to effectively live together in our global society. Even though moral disagreements may be inevitable due to particular cultural and individual differences, it is still possible to agree on what to do in the world, without sharing the same justifying reasons across various cultures and groups of people. By emphasizing our shared humanity and our shared

world we inhabit, we can overcome (but at the same time respect and understand) our unique differences and get used to one another. Yet, social media virtual encounters that are prevalent in modern society provide an unprecedented challenge to engaging productively with those who are different from us. Given an increasing lack of direct encounters, especially in COVID-19, this media "connectivity" can also be consequential for mental health and psychological well-being. Through the examples of disagreements on Twitter surrounding women's reproductive rights and climate change, it is evident social media interactions are divisive, exclusive, polarized, and do not foster respect or understanding. Social media creates unhealthy relationships with others as we enact social comparisons. Instead, the goal of cosmopolitan cross-cultural conversation is "not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others . . . encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves" (Appiah 85). Encountering others does not need to reach a consensus on how we should live, but rather, conversations bridge differences and unite us by our shared humanity. Using our innovative ability to find creative ways to connect with others through social media is vital. Social media institutions have been associated with positive social engagement and education, so tapping into these efforts will be beneficial (Couldry 90). Our contemporary world needs to shift to broadly represent a diverse range of others, rather than limit who is presented in media, to build a global community of invigorating and sincere conversation and understanding.

Reference List

Appiah, Anthony. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: ethics in a world of strangers*. New York: W. W.

    Norton & Co.

Couldry, Nick. 2012. "Media and the Hidden Shaping of the Social." In *Media, Society,*

    World—Social Theory and Digital Media Practice, 84-108. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Nonnecke, Brandie, Alejandro Martin del Campo, Simarjeev Singh, Willy Wu, and Camille

    Crittenden. 2019. "Women's Reproductive Rights—Computational Propaganda in the

    United States." *Institute for the Future, Digital Intelligence Lab*: 1-15.

    https://www.iftf.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/ourwork/IFTF_WomenReproducti

    veRights_comp.prop_W_05.07.19.pdf.

Swain, John. 2016. "Mapped: The climate change conversation on Twitter." *Carbon*

    Brief—Clear on Climate.

    https://www.carbonbrief.org/mapped-the-climate-change-conversation-on-twitter.

Van Dijck, José. 2013. "Twitter and the Paradox of Following and Trending." In *The Culture of*

    Connectivity—A Critical History of Social Media, 68-89. New York, NY: Oxford

    University Press.

Warrender, Dan, and Rosa Milne. 2020. "How use of social media and social comparison affect

    mental health." *Nursing Times [online]*; 116: 3, 56-59.

    https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/mental-health/how-use-of-social-media-and-social-co

    mparison-affect-mental-health-24-02-2020/.