

AFTERWORD BY RUTH CHOU SIMONS



SOCIAL SANITY



IN AN



INSTA WORLD



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INTRODUCTION

SARAH EEKHOFF ZYLSTRA

Every week, my husband, Adam, locks me out of my social media accounts.

It's mainly Facebook. I have an Instagram I never use and a Twitter account where I sometimes share the stories I've written for The Gospel Coalition. But it's Facebook that really gets me.

The thing is, I love to see the updates of family and friends going on vacation, announcing pregnancies, or sharing job changes. I honestly love those people, and I love knowing what they're up to. I truly want to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). I want to encourage my friends and to be encouraged—to live in community made possible by God's good gift of social media.

But a while ago—if I'm honest, *years* ago—I started noticing how gross I felt after checking in. I'd be anxious,

discontent, and impatient—and that was without even reading partisan news or consciously envying someone else’s vacation.

Even if I logged in carefully, aware of all the dangers of envy and time-wasting and pride, I’d *still* emerge feeling overwhelmed and guilty about the home renovation projects I wasn’t doing, trips I wasn’t taking, or experiences I wasn’t giving my kids. Then I’d feel bad about not posting enough, or posting too much, or posting the wrong thing. Sometimes this led me to snap unfairly at my family, and then I felt guilty about *that*.

Adam didn’t seem to struggle the same way—he thought social media was boring—so I thought it was just me. But here’s what I didn’t know: research shows women use social media to build relationships, while men use it more transactionally, like to find information or to network with new connections.¹ You can literally measure the different approaches:

- Women use social media more than men and are more likely to repeatedly check in throughout the day.²
- Online, women are more supportive than men. Women tend to use more smile and hug emojis, more ellipses, more exclamation points (!!!), and more OMGs and LOLs. (Men use “yeah.”)³

1. Nicole L. Muscanell and Rosanna E. Guadagno, “Make new friends or keep the old: Gender and personality differences in social networking use,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 1 (January 2012): 107–12.
2. Jeff Clabaugh, “Why women check social media more than men,” WTOP News, October 22, 2018, <https://wtop.com/business-finance/2018/10/why-women-check-social-media-more-than-men>.
3. Aleksandra Atanasova, “Gender-Specific Behaviors on Social Media and What

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- Women also use more hesitant language (“hmmm” or “umm”), personal pronouns (“me” and “you”), and informal spelling (“Whaaaaat!?” or “soooo happy!”).
- Women write shorter messages and post them twice as often as men do.⁴ They tend to write about personal issues (feeling thankful, family fun, birthdays, asking for support or prayers), while men favor more abstract topics (politics, deep thoughts, Christianity, sports).⁵
- Overall, women receive more comments than men.⁶
- Women post more selfies and more photos in which they’re looking directly at the camera.⁷ Men tend to post full-body shots or photos that include other people.
- Even when following a brand,⁸ women are more likely to engage in relationship—offering feedback and entering drawings—than men are.⁹

They Mean for Online Communications,” *Social Media Today*, November 6, 2016, <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/social-networks/gender-specific-behaviors-social-media-and-what-they-mean-online-communications>.

4. Moira Burke, Robert Kraut, and Yi-Chia Wang, “Gender, Topic, and Audience Response: An Analysis of User-Generated Content on Facebook,” *Meta Research*, April 27, 2013, <https://research.facebook.com/publications/gender-topic-and-audience-response-an-analysis-of-user-generated-content-on-facebook/>.
5. Burke, Kraut, and Wang, “Gender, Topic, and Audience Response.”
6. Burke, Kraut, and Wang, “Gender, Topic, and Audience Response.”
7. “Selfieexploratory,” *SelfieCity*, accessed January 13, 2022, <http://selfiecity.net/selfieexploratory>.
8. Nina Haferkamp, Sabrina C. Eimler, Anna-Margarita Papadakis, and Jana Vanessa Kruck, “Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus? Examining Gender Differences in Self-Presentation on Social Networking Sites,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15, no. 2 (February 2012).
9. “Women are driving the social media revolution,” *ConnectAmericas*, accessed

So it seems like being a woman online would be really warm and fuzzy, doesn't it? But that's not how it works, because there's a disconnect between how we *write our posts* and how we *read other people's posts*.

Case in point: my posts are uniformly perky—*Hey, I wrote a book! And my son earned a perfect score on the National Latin Exam!! And we went to the ocean on vacation!!!*

When I shared those things, I was high on the adrenaline of accomplishment. I wanted to bring somebody along with me on that ride, to share my joy with those who love me (and love my son). I wanted to build a connection—I wanted my friends to know what happened to me.

But that's probably not how my friends read those posts. I know, because that's not how I read my friends' posts. For Pete's sake, I got jealous the other day when one of them got Dunkin' Donuts.

That disconnect, made possible by a virtual reality where you can select how to portray yourself, leads to a seemingly constant "social media envy," which two-thirds of women feel at least once a month and a quarter feel three times or more a month.¹⁰ There's a growing pile of academic research on the connection between social media, envy, anxiety, and depression (just search "social media envy" on Google Scholar to see a sampling).

I knew time online wasn't good for me, so I resolved to check in less often and to be more disciplined about

January 13, 2022, <https://connectamericas.com/content/women-are-driving-social-media-revolution>.

10. Alexandra Samuel, "Jealous of your Facebook friends? You're not alone," *Experience*, March 13, 2019, <https://expmag.com/2019/03/jealous-of-your-facebook-friends-youre-not-alone>.

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what I was viewing and for how long. But that was like sitting an alcoholic in front of a tap and telling him not to drink. My self-control was no match for Facebook.

So I asked Adam to lock me out. He was more than willing—I think he had the passwords changed before I even finished asking him to. These days, he lets me in on Sunday afternoons to skim through Facebook and Twitter, then he locks me out again. (If you see me posting during the week, that’s because I emailed Adam and he put it up for me.)

I wish I could tell you that this small and structured use of social media fixed everything. But it didn’t—it was almost worse. When I logged on, I felt simultaneously addicted to scrolling and impatient to get off. And after I was done, I was just as guilty, anxious, discontent, and impatient as before.

At this point, maybe you’re asking the same question I asked myself a thousand times: *Why didn’t you just quit?*

Yeah, why didn’t I? Sometimes I’d answer myself, “Well, because I like seeing the updates from everyone.” And I did, but let’s be real—a quick skim through a few posts once a week wasn’t giving me a huge amount of information. And I’ve been around long enough to know that the information I was seeing from someone online was only a fraction of the whole story.

Or sometimes my answer was, “Because I need to stay on for my job.” And that was kind of true. Not because a lot of people find my work through social media—my number of followers is too tiny for me to have anything resembling a platform—but because my job involves a lot of research, and being able to access other people’s

accounts is super helpful. But my job sure doesn't require me to scroll aimlessly every Sunday afternoon.

No, my real answer was deeper and darker than that. I stuck around because Facebook held my online identity—the persona I'd created over years of cheerful pictures and witty observations of my daily life. It was the Creative Memories version of my life—the better, happier, kinder, more interesting version of me. If I left Facebook, I'd just be regular me. Regular me isn't perfect, or even perfectly imperfect. Regular me is kind of boring, a mess of sin and mistakes and dirty dishes piled up on the counter.

Looking for a version of salvation via Facebook—yikes! Trust me, I knew this was a problem. I knew I had sin here to dig out, look at, confess, and repent. (Maybe you do, too?) But even as I worked through that, I didn't know if my end goal should be to leave social media. It seemed like there was common grace in the sharing of a bit of life together—not the same as being in person, of course, but of finding healthy recipes, or recommending good vacation spots, or reading beautiful biblical insights. Social media does build community—of a sort—and is a public square that I'm not sure Christians should abandon. It seemed like somehow I should be able to use this platform for Jesus.

Do you feel like that too?

But *how*? How can we be wise as serpents and innocent as doves on social media (Matt. 10:16)? How can we guard our time as well as guard our hearts against envy, anger, or sloth? How can we encourage others without being overly simplistic or share without bragging? How can we challenge or correct without needlessly offending?

How can we be vulnerable without complaining or cheerful without sounding fake?

Maybe you, like me, have looked around but haven't found a lot of gospel-centered guidance for Christian women.

Loving our female friends in a real-life community is hard enough. Loving them online, in a virtual community with algorithms, advertisements, and self-selected information, is far trickier. A lot of the advice we hear—be kind, share encouraging Bible verses, don't humble-brag—is good.¹¹ But it also doesn't feel like *enough*. Social media is a huge beast, and we need more than “set a timer”—as helpful as that is!—to help us think about it in a gospel-centered way.

GOSPEL-CENTERED MEANS WE ARE ANCHORED IN—AND SO KEEP RETURNING TO—THE GOOD NEWS OF SALVATION BY FAITH ALONE THROUGH CHRIST ALONE.

I wanted someone to help me see God's common grace in Facebook—and its limitations. I wanted to know if it could be redeemed to be a tool to serve well, or if it was better for me—like Joseph running from temptation—to leave.

This book has changed the game for me, and I'm confident it can for you too.

Here's what we'll do: First, I'll give you a brief history of social media (particularly as it pertains to women), because it's already hard for me to remember when I started posting—it seems like Facebook has always been there.

11. Tim Arndt, “15 Things Christians Should Stop Doing on Social Media,” *Relevant Magazine*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/christians-lets-all-stop-doing-these-15-things-on-social-media/>.

But that's not true; Facebook's not even old enough to drink alcohol, and Instagram's still in middle school.

If history's not your thing, don't worry, we'll get back to the present soon—but honestly, even a quick glance at the development of these platforms will show you that your struggles with social media aren't all because you lack self-control.

After that, we've got seven chapters and an afterword, each authored by a woman who loves the Lord, is wise, and has extensive experience with social media. In each area—identity, emotions, discernment, influence, relationships, rhythms, and deciding whether to leave—the authors share three things:

1. *Positives*—the common grace found in the area she's addressing
2. *Pitfalls*—the prevalent problems that arise in her area
3. *Principles*—the biblical principles that can help us effectively engage these areas

I hope you find their insights and advice as valuable as I did. Adam still locks me out of my accounts, because nobody needs to be checking social media as often as I used to. I'm still wrestling through what to post, and why, and how often. And I still occasionally catch myself in a time warp of scrolling.

But when I log on now, I'm able to think through my interactions from a biblical perspective and with a heart that finds its identity in Christ alone. At least I've got a starting point, and I know I'm facing the right direction. And that has made a world of difference.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

Getting Started: What's your favorite social media platform? Why do you like it?

1. "Women use social media to build relationships" (p. 10). In what ways do you use social media to build relationships? Which of the examples on page 10 have you noticed in your experience?
2. What's your perspective when you post on social media? What's your perspective when you read other people's posts? Why might this cause tension in your heart?
3. Have you ever considered quitting social media? Why do you stay?
4. What do you hope to gain as you read this book?

Further Study: Read Psalm 119:37

1. What does the psalmist ask God to turn his eyes away from?
2. What does he want to orient himself toward?
3. Where do we find God's ways revealed? According to this verse, what do God's ways give us?
4. How might social media at times be "worthless"?
5. How could using it according to God's ways give us life?



CHAPTER 1

HISTORY: UNDERSTANDING THE STORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

SARAH EEKHOFF ZYLSTRA

In the fall of 2003, Mark Zuckerberg was feeling irritated about a girl.¹

Wanting to distract himself from thinking about her, the Harvard sophomore noodled around online,

1. Bari M. Schwartz, "Hot or Not? Website Briefly Judges Looks," *The Harvard Crimson*, November 4, 2003, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2003/11/4/hot-or-not-website-briefly-judges>.

soon hacking into the college's websites to gather student ID photos. While a "little intoxicated," the coding whiz sorted them into pairs on a website called Facemash and asked people to vote on who was better looking.

"Were we let in for our looks? No. Will we be judged on them? Yes," he wrote.

A few hours later, 450 people had voted at least 22,000 times. School officials caught on, shut down the site, and warned Zuckerberg about breaching security and violating individual privacy.²

But Zuckerberg, a psychology major, couldn't stop gathering and organizing useful information—in high school he'd created a program that could make music recommendations based on what a user had listened to. Earlier that year he'd released CourseMatch, which let you know who was signed up for which Harvard classes so you could make your choices accordingly.

Four months after Facemash, Zuckerberg launched TheFacebook, where Harvard students could upload their own photos and some personal information—their major, their club memberships, their favorite quotes—and link to their friends' pages.

One day later, TheFacebook had between 1,200 and 1,500 members.³

"Within a week, it felt like the whole school had signed up," one senior said. Three weeks later, Zuckerberg opened TheFacebook to students in other colleges;

2. Katharine A. Kaplan, "Facemash Creator Survives Ad Board," *The Harvard Crimson*, November 19, 2003, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2003/11/19/facemash-creator-survives-ad-board-the>.
3. John Cassidy, "Me Media," *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/05/15/me-media>.

by September, he had 250,000 users. (He didn't return to class.)

Within a few years, it felt like the whole world had signed up. My first Facebook post—on June 1, 2007—was four photos of my son. He was a year old, with big cheeks and red curls. I put up a picture of him helping in the kitchen, two of him at Millennium Park in downtown Chicago, and one of him chewing on a toothbrush.

“Well well well, you finally caved and got your own page huh?” my friend posted on my wall. “Gotta love it. And as a warning—it is very addictive.”

She was right on both counts. It *was* addictive. (More on that later.) And I *was* late to the party—but it was hard to be early to this one, because it moves *fast*. Facebook itself was late, coming after SixDegrees, Friendster, LinkedIn, and MySpace. Close on its heels were YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, and Vine. For the past 25 years, the social media party has been a tumble of comings and goings.

By 2021, 78 percent of American women were using at least one social media site.

Nearly all of them are on Facebook, which had 2.85 *billion* monthly active users in 2021. (For comparison, there are fewer than 8 billion people *on the planet*.)

That's worth noting, because while dozens of sites have taken a shot at hosting social networking, Facebook has bested them all. And to understand how we interact online—and how we *should*

IN 2021, TGC SENT OUT A SURVEY TO WOMEN WHO HAD ATTENDED TGC CONFERENCES OR SIGNED UP FOR TGC EMAIL LISTS. OF THE NEARLY 1,500 WHO RESPONDED, 99 PERCENT HAD USED SOCIAL MEDIA.

interact—we first need to understand the evolving social gathering we’re attending.

PHASE ONE: ONLINE JOURNALING (1997–2005)

In the beginning—in this case, the late 1990s and early 2000s—online blogs and social media accounts weren’t that different from writing a letter using paper and pen. If you had SixDegrees (launched in 1997) or Friendster (launched in 2002), you could create a profile, add friends, and exchange messages—it was like a mix of email and a robust phone book.

If you were on LiveJournal or Blogger (both launched in 1999), you could upload words onto an online diary. You could add a photo or two, but the internet wasn’t strong enough to support a lot of images, videos, stickers, or filters. So you were primarily posting words.

Like letter recipients, the people reading your words were few in number and likely those who knew you well in real life. (I occasionally read my cousin’s blog and my friend’s blog, both of which were newsy updates about birthday parties or piano recitals.) The internet was still somewhat new—just half of American adults had access in 2000 and most of that was work or school related.⁴ People had email before they had MySpace—as late as 2005, just 5 percent of Americans were using social media.

Early adopters, then, couldn’t rely on posting to announce job changes or pregnancies. Social media was just

4. “Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, April 7, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband>.

for fun, and most people didn't visit every day. (I caught up on my two blogs once a month or so.) The vibe for both posts and blogs was personal—people wrote to their family and friends, or they wrote just for themselves, anonymously, to no one and everyone.

That made the vibe also feel authentic. Bloggers weren't making money, so they were writing about what they were interested in or knew about—politics or sports or current events. And a lot of them—primarily women—were writing about everyday life.⁵ They were sharing things you wouldn't read in glossy women's magazines (or didn't want to ask your mom), about blowout diapers or painful breastfeeding sessions or how lonely it was to stay home with babies.

For many women, sharing their experiences—or reading someone else's—was both therapeutic and a form of friendship. Three out of five women were now in the workforce, and all five were less likely than

ABOUT A QUARTER OF TGC SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID THEY JOINED SOCIAL MEDIA EITHER IN 2004 (WHEN FACEBOOK LAUNCHED) OR 2006 (WHEN FACEBOOK OPENED TO THE PUBLIC).

previous generations to belong to churches, community groups, or volunteer organizations.⁶ While our grandmothers shared coffee and recipes with women down the street, our mothers blazed the way into double-career families, commuting from the suburbs, and buying

5. David Hochman, "Mommy (and Me)," *New York Times*, January 30, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/30/fashion/mommy-and-me.html>.

6. "Record Number of Women in the U.S. Labor Force," Population Reference Bureau, February 1, 2001, <https://www.prb.org/resources/record-number-of-women-in-the-u-s-labor-force>.

televisions—developments that Robert Putnam, who wrote *Bowling Alone* in 2000, identifies as the main reasons for the decline of community in America.⁷

That's exactly where I was around 2006. A brand-new mom in a brand-new community, with a part-time job and a husband who worked full-time, I was wondering how to fill the long hours, how to get a baby to stay asleep, and how to make dinner. Staying home was more isolating than I'd realized, and social media was a great place to feel like I was grabbing a minute with friends between the tasks of the day.

PHASE TWO: THE MEDIUM SHAPES THE MESSAGE (AROUND 2006)

Before I joined Facebook, if a user wanted to see what her friend was up to, she visited her page or blog. If the friend didn't have anything new posted, she thought about who else she might like to check up on, and she headed there. If she got tired of checking for new content, she quit and did something else. Or she could subscribe to blog newsletters, which came regularly to her email inbox—like a newspaper or magazine would.

And then Facebook—in the pattern of 24-hour cable news—invented the news feed. The team pulled together new information about a user's friends—who posted a photo, who changed their relationship status, who was at a party—and prioritized it into a constantly updating list. They worked on it for more than a year, released it

7. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

at midnight one September night in 2006, and popped champagne to congratulate themselves—they'd just made things a lot easier and less time-consuming for their users. Then they went to bed.

“We woke up to hundreds of thousands of outraged people,” Facebook developer Ruchi Sanghvi wrote. “Facebook groups like ‘I hate newsfeed’, ‘Ruchi is the devil’ had formed in the middle of the night. News reporters and students were camped out in front of the offices. We had to sneak out of the back door to leave the office.”⁸

Some called for a boycott, reasoning that “before Feeds, it was already easy enough to stalk anyone at your school, and everyone on your friends list; but with the advent of Feeds, it is now nearly impossible not to be ‘stalked’ or to ‘stalk.’ Without even trying an individual now knows the changing relationship status of individuals on their friends list, the new ‘friendships’ added by users, and the photos tagged by either a user or a user’s friends.”⁹

It felt gross, like a violation of someone else’s privacy and of your own. In less than two days, a million users—10 percent of Facebook’s population—had joined a group opposing the news feed. So many people protested at Facebook’s offices that the staff had to hire a security guard.¹⁰

But while Zuckerberg apologized publicly for rolling

8. Ruchi Sanghvi, “Yesterday Mark reminded me it was the 10 year anniversary of News Feed,” Facebook, September 7, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/ruchi/posts/10101160244871819>.
9. A Day Without Facebook (website), accessed January 13, 2022, <http://daywithoutfacebook.blogspot.com>.
10. Adam Fisher, “Sex, Beer, and Coding: Inside Facebook’s Wild Early Days,” *WIRED*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/sex-beer-and-coding-inside-facebooks-wild-early-days/>.

out the feed without explanation, he didn't pull it back. Here's why: he could see that the *same people* who were protesting were also using Facebook *twice as much* as before. Even if the news feed made them feel voyeuristic, people couldn't look away.

A few weeks later, when Facebook opened the doors to anyone who wanted to join, people did—at a rate of 50,000 a day.¹¹

(Side note—in 2009, Facebook staff noticed that a lot of comments were things like “Excellent!” “Glad to hear it!” or “Nice!” To clear the comment section for more substantial interactions, they added the like button. Similar to the news feed, though, the like button proved to be addicting. Like a gambler at the slots, your brain isn't sure when, or how many, likes you'll receive for a post. And every time you see another one, you get a dopamine hit of pleasure in your brain. So you keep coming back.)

8 IN 10 TGC SURVEY
RESPONDENTS
USE FACEBOOK.

The news feed was a turning point—it has shown up on social media platforms ever since (Twitter in 2006, Instagram and Pinterest in 2010, Snapchat in 2011, TikTok in 2016). It changed the social media experience in two critical ways.

First, it moved the impetus, which used to be on the user to entertain herself, to the social media platform. It's like your mom moving the chip bowl from the counter to the couch where you're watching Netflix—the amount of

11. David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 197.

effort you need to exert to keep consuming has dropped to nothing. Even if I tell myself I'm just going to check in on a couple friends, I *always* end up scrolling the news feed.

And second, it changed the nature of the updates. Before, you were posting for the few close friends who would bother to come and look for you. Now, you were posting for everyone you'd ever friended. You had to be more careful with what you said, with what picture you chose, with how you portrayed yourself.

And if you were good at it, you might start to gather attention, to reach people outside of your tightest circles. You might start to grow an audience—a platform.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE BLOGGERNACLE

The earliest online platforms for women were blogs. I'm a writer, so you'd think blogs would be right up my alley. But I never started one—not because I had a well-thought-out objection, but because I couldn't think of anything to say.

I might have been the only one with that problem. Between 2003 and 2006, the number of blogs doubled from 30 million to 60 million.¹² Businesses, journalism schools, and public relations teams started taking them seriously. In 2005, a blogger was issued a White House press pass for the first time.¹³

12. Donald K. Wright and Michelle D. Hinson, "How Blogs and Social Media are Changing Public Relations and the Way it is Practiced," *Public Relations Journal* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2008), <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.590.7572&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

13. Katharine Q. Seelye, "MEDIA; White House Approves Pass For Blogger," *New York Times*, March 7, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/07/washington/media-white-house-approves-pass-for-blogger.html>.

The mommy blog genre was now large enough to split into subgenres—the cooking moms, the crafting moms, the DIY moms, the fashion moms, the wine-drinking moms, the Christian moms. (Ann Voskamp started her blog in 2004; Ree Drummond began *Pioneer Woman* in 2006.)

And the Mormon moms.

Blogging online was a natural fit for a lot of young Latter-Day Saints (LDS). Mormons value diary-keeping, family, healthy living (no alcohol or coffee), and DIY frugality—all things that play well on blogs or social media.¹⁴ In 2007, an LDS elder encouraged blogging in a commencement speech at Brigham Young University–Hawaii. “If you have access to the internet you can start a blog in minutes and begin sharing what you know to be true,” he told the graduates.¹⁵

By 2010, there were 2,000 Mormon mommy blogs and a spoof blog called *Seriously, So Blessed!* (also created by a Latter-Day Saint).¹⁶ Their audiences were huge—and not all Mormon.¹⁷

“Their lives are nothing like mine—I’m your standard-issue late-20-something childless overeducated

14. “Mormons,” History, December 20, 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/mormons>.

15. Elder M. Russell Ballard, “Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet,” *Ensign* (July 2008), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2008/07/sharing-the-gospel-using-the-internet>.

16. Amelia Nielson-Stowell, “Mormon moms connect through blogs,” *Deseret News*, June 2, 2010, <https://www.deseret.com/2010/6/2/20118159/amelia-nielson-stowell-mormon-moms-connect-through-blogs>; Molly Farmer, “A clever twist on Mormon mommy blogs,” *Deseret News*, July 21, 2008, <https://www.deseret.com/2008/7/21/20379464/a-clever-twist-on-mormon-mommy-blogs>.

17. Nona Willis Aronowitz and Brad Ogbonna, “Sister Bloggers: Why So Many Lifestyle Bloggers Happen to Be Mormon,” *Good*, December 1, 2011, <https://www.good.is/articles/sister-bloggers>.

atheist feminist—yet I’m completely obsessed with their blogs,” wrote Emily Matchar in *Salon* in 2011.¹⁸ “On an average day, I’ll skim through a half-dozen Mormon blogs, looking at Polaroids of dogs in raincoats or kids in bow ties, reading gratitude lists, admiring sewing projects.”

For non-Mormons like Matchar, LDS mommy blogs were a window to a world that seemed relaxed and peaceful, full of old-fashioned joys like loving your husband, staying home full-time with your kids, and decorating cookies with your mom and sisters. It seemed like a version of heaven.

I wonder sometimes if this was a missed opportunity for Christians. If we were better organized, couldn’t we have released an army of bloggers to give testimony to the truth of God at work in our lives?

Maybe we could have. Maybe we still can. But we’d have to avoid the mistakes of some Mormon mommy bloggers, one of which is not mentioning Mormonism very much, and another of which is depicting a life that’s too good to be true.¹⁹

The popularity of those “shiny, happy” lives was a direct pendulum swing from the gritty, real-life early blogs. It felt like we were back in a styled magazine spread selling readers the perfect outfits, perfect diaper bags, perfect home decor.

18. Emily Matchar, “Why I can’t stop reading Mormon housewife blogs,” *Salon*, January 15, 2011, https://www.salon.com/2011/01/15/feminist_obsessed_with_mormon_blogs.

19. Matchar, “Mormon housewife blogs”; Morgan Jones, “Are Utah and Mormon mommy bloggers creating a false perception of reality?” *Deseret News*, January 24, 2017, <https://www.deseret.com/2017/1/24/20604721/are-utah-and-mormon-mommy-bloggers-creating-a-false-perception-of-reality>.

Why the shift? If readers were drawn to the raw honesty of those early days, why change anything?

My dear Watson, it's economics.

PHASE THREE: PHOTOS AND MONEY (AROUND 2010)

The timing was perfect. Four months after the launch of the iPhone 4—the first with a front-facing camera—two 20-something Stanford graduates launched a photo-sharing app. Instagram was immediately successful, garnering a million users in a few months and selling itself to Facebook for \$1 billion within two years.²⁰

Being able to easily share—and edit and add filters to—photos was a game changer. It was like a move from black-and-white to color, or from radio to television. It seemed like my whole family got cuter overnight and previously normal moments—walking through a rain puddle, riding our bikes, reading books together—were suddenly photo ops. I don't mean this in a derogatory way at all, because I loved seeing and capturing the beauty in our everyday. But you already know the dangers here—the mom spending more time on her phone than with her children, or the acrobatics we do to make things seem more fun than they are.

AMERICAN WOMEN WHO
USE INSTAGRAM: 44 PERCENT;
TGC RESPONDENTS WHO USE
INSTAGRAM: 76 PERCENT

Another effect—you no longer needed to be a gifted

20. Statista Research Department, "Percentage of U.S. adults who use Instagram as of February 2021, by gender." Statista, April 14, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/246195/share-of-us-internet-users-who-use-instagram-by-gender>.

writer to surge in popularity. You just needed to be able to take good photos. And businesses, which were already prowling around the edges of social media and blogs, had a way to get in front of the millions of social media users.

Here's the deal: human brains process images far faster than text—you can identify the McDonald's arches or the Amazon smile in one-tenth of a second. Photos also work to tug at our emotions (you'd rather cuddle a baby I showed you than one I only told you about) and hang around in our memories longer than words. When you add them to a post or blog, they get 40 percent more shares than posts without images.²¹

Around this time, blogs and social media became a feeding frenzy for advertisers. You can hardly blame them—if you wanted to sell Taylor Swift T-shirts before, you'd buy a print advertisement (perhaps in *Rolling Stone* or *Entertainment Weekly*) or television spot and hope for the best. Now you could ask Facebook to show your ad image to 18- to 24-year-old women who lived in and around Chicago in the four weeks leading up to a scheduled Taylor Swift concert.

Or you could pay an Instagram influencer—perhaps a 25-year-old with 100,000 followers who loves music and lives in Chicago—to wear the shirt, say something about how comfortable it is, and link to your store.

Women who were popular on social media now had the opportunity to earn a little spending money, finish off the car payments, or—if they were really famous—support their family. Some parlayed online success into

21. Attilio Botta, “5 reasons why your marketing needs images (and how to use them),” Bynder, last updated February 27, 2020, <https://www.bynder.com/en/blog/the-impact-of-images>.

book deals (Glennon Doyle published *Carry On Warrior* in 2013), television deals (Jen Hatmaker hosted *Your Big Family Renovation* in 2015), and brand deals (Target began selling Joanna Gaines’s Magnolia line in 2017). By 2016, companies were spending \$255 million a month on influencer marketing.²²

For those women, social media became a business. To be successful, they needed to attract more and more followers, who would click through to buy what their brand was selling. So their posts became more thoughtful, their pictures more beautiful. Messages were no longer aimed at friends but at an audience.

That meant non-influencer women were more likely to be in an audience, to follow people they’d never met in real life.

“You were no longer just looking at what your brother did over the weekend,” Risen Motherhood co-founder Laura Wifler told me. “Now you’re following people you don’t know. Why do we do that? There’s an element of curiosity there—to see how the other half lives, or what other moms do.”

And there’s common grace in it—I’ve learned how to properly fold fitted sheets, more effectively memorize Bible verses, and create a capsule wardrobe. But like everything else, social media is based on imperfect systems

HALF OF TGC SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID THEY FOLLOW MULTIPLE INFLUENCERS FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, INCLUDING UNDERSTANDING THEIR FAITH OR LIFESTYLE INSPIRATION.

22. Deborah Weinswig, “Influencers Are The New Brands,” *Forbes*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahweinswig/2016/10/05/influencers-are-the-new-brands>.

and peopled with sinners. There are also elements of voyeurism, of greed, of jealousy, or of following someone just to feel better about yourself.

PHASE FOUR: THINGS GET DARKER (AROUND 2015)

By the second half of the 2010s, it was easier for me to see the problems with my social media use. By then, I knew that not only was I following people who weren't really my friends, but I wasn't seeing their real life.

“Living online’ for us looks completely different now than it did when we set out to build this community, and the emotional and physical toll of it is rapidly becoming a health hazard,” wrote popular blogger (and former Mormon) Heather Armstrong when shutting down her blog in 2015.²³ She’d been struggling with depression, a failing marriage, and the ethics of manufacturing experiences in order to advertise products.²⁴

Hers wasn't the only marriage to sink under the veneer of online perfection, nor was she the only one to lose her faith. Glennon Doyle separated from her husband in the middle of promoting a book about her marriage.²⁵ Later she married soccer star Abby Wambach. Jen Hatmaker announced her marriage was over 10 weeks after a post

23. Heather Armstrong, “Looking upward and ahead,” Dooce, April 23, 2015, <https://dooce.com/2015/04/23/looking-upward-and-ahead>.

24. Chavie Lieber, “She was the ‘queen of the mommy bloggers.’ Then her life fell apart,” Vox, updated May 2, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/4/25/18512620/dooce-heather-armstrong-depression-vaedictorian-of-being-dead>.

25. Glennon Doyle, “I need to tell you something,” Momastery, August 1, 2016, <https://momastery.com/blog/2016/08/01/i-need-to-tell-you-something>.

celebrating her relationship with her husband Brandon. She quit going to church and deconstructed her faith.²⁶ Rachel Hollis (who became famous after posting a photo on Facebook of her stretch marks) announced her impending divorce about a month after releasing a podcast with her husband on their make-out sessions.²⁷

Pressure is also starting to come from the children of influencers, some of whom are now old enough to object to their parents' online sharing.²⁸

But influencers aren't the only ones struggling online. Over the past five years, alarms have been raised over

- the amount of time regular people spend on social media (more than 1,300 hours in 2020, on average);²⁹
- the addictive nature of social media (34 percent of women reported being addicted to social media in 2019, compared with 26 percent of men);³⁰
- the misinformation, hate, and harassment we see on social media (64 percent of Americans said

26. Michael J. Kruger, "Jen Hatmaker and the Power of De-Conversion Stories," The Gospel Coalition, February 6, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jen-hatmaker-power-deconversion-stories>.
27. Katherine Rosman, "Girl, Wash Your Timeline," *New York Times*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/style/rachel-hollis-tiktok-video.html>.
28. Taylor Lorenz, "When Kids Realize Their Whole Life Is Already Online," *The Atlantic*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/02/when-kids-realize-their-whole-life-already-online/582916>.
29. Peter Suci, "Americans Spent On Average More Than 1,300 Hours On Social Media Last Year," *Forbes*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2021/06/24/americans-spent-more-than-1300-hours-on-social-media/?sh=564a662547fc>.
30. Statista Research Department, "Share of online users in the United States who report being addicted to social media as of April 2019, by gender," Statista, October 19, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1081269/social-media-addiction-by-gender-usa>.

social media has a “mostly negative effect on the way things are going in this country today”);³¹

- the apparent correlation of social media with rising rates of anxiety and depression (especially among teen girls).³²

I don’t know about you, but I can relate to every one of those. But the truth is, I believe that Jesus died to redeem the world. I believe the Holy Spirit works that redemption in and through Christians. And I believe God’s gorgeous grace holds everything—from oceans to children to the internet—together.

REDEMPTION (TODAY)

So here we are, on online platforms (small as they might be) that can make us feel envious and anxious, addicted, and irritated. But from which we can also share our lives, testify to God’s goodness, encourage others, and make connections.

How can we do that well?

31. Brooke Auxier, “64% of Americans say social media have a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in the U.S. today,” Pew Research Center, October 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/15/64-of-americans-say-social-media-have-a-mostly-negative-effect-on-the-way-things-are-going-in-the-u-s-today>.
32. Fazida Karim, Azeezat A. Oyewande, Lamis F. Abdalla, Reem Chaudhry Ehsanullah, and Safeera Khan, “Social Media Use and Its Connection to Mental Health: A Systematic Review,” *Cureus* 12, no. 6 (June 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7364393>; Shaohai Jiang and Annabel Ngien, “The Effects of Instagram Use, Social Comparison, and Self-Esteem on Social Anxiety: A Survey Study in Singapore,” *Social Media + Society* (April 2020), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305120912488>; Jamie Ducharme, “Social Media Hurts Girls More Than Boys,” *Time*, August 13, 2019, <https://time.com/5650266/social-media-girls-mental-health>.

We can begin by asking ourselves one serious question: Why are you using social media?

You know why I'm still on . . . identity problems. (You, too?)

Since that seems foundational, let's start there.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

Getting Started: When did you begin using social media? What was your first post?

1. "Social media was a great place to feel like I was grabbing a minute with friends between the tasks of the day" (p. 24). Has this been your experience? What other reasons do you have for logging on?
2. How did the news feed change the social media experience (p. 26)? What effects do those two shifts have on your social media engagement?
3. How are social media and money connected? Have you ever bought something on (or because of) social media? Have you ever sold something? Why is it important to be aware of the economic dimensions of social media?
4. Even if history or social science isn't your thing, why is it valuable to understand the development of social media? What's something you learned in this chapter that changes the way you view your time online?

Further Study: Read Genesis 3:1–21

1. What did God command Adam and Eve (see Gen. 2:16–17)? What did Adam and Eve do?
2. What were the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin?
3. What blessing did God promise despite their rebellion?
4. Why is it important for us, in the 21st century, to know the history recorded in this passage?
5. How does it help our understanding of social media to realize it's developed by—and used by—fallen people? How might Genesis 3 cause us to be cautious about social media? How might Genesis 3 give us reason for hope?