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English 101

12/7/24

An Autoethnography of a Luddite: A Community College Student's Search for Authenticity

INTRODUCTION

“How do you get so empty?”- Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

My autoethnography explores my personal experience with social media addiction and the realization of its immense capability in controlling a person's way of living. I offer a critical perspective on what it's like to detox from a social media addiction and I analyze my struggles, including peer pressure, boredom, and the fear of missing out. Those aware of the harmful effects and actively trying to change their relationship with technology are termed as “Luddites”. According to Brett Clancy, the author of an essay about the original Luddite movement, which began in 1811-1812 Nottingham, England, “[Luddites] were not, as is generally believed, necessarily against the introduction of new machinery, rather, they fought against the consequences of the implementation of that machinery.” In my interview with Amanda Hanna McLeer, she explained that

The original Luddites were against the abuse, not the use, of technology. These were textile workers who were extremely skilled, and they were being replaced by early automaton, by the looms. And they only started destroying the looms when they were being fired from

their jobs, when they weren't being properly compensated any longer, when children were being employed in their old roles... And it was also against the law to unionize in England at that time (1811-1812). So, they tried every [other means of] protest, and they smashed the looms and got this terrible reputation only after they had no other recourse...(1:05-1:06).

All young Luddites of the modern era may agree that the introduction of social media, although it connects everyone who uses it globally, increases job prospects, and acts as an outlet for the difficulties and stresses in daily life, poses equally horrific qualities such as spikes in major depression among teens, spikes in mental illness among college students, and of course, an overall sense that one's life is meaningless. By writing about my experience, I hope to show that it is possible in the modern era to disassociate from social medias long enough to "think, focus, forget ourselves enough to care about others, and build close relationships." (Haidt, 23)

In "Suicide: A Study in Sociology" (1952), French sociologist Emile Durkheim uses the concept of "anomie" to describe a social state "when traditional rules have lost their authority...the state of de-regulation is thus further heightened by passions being less disciplined, precisely when they need more disciplining" (124-125). In Durkheim's view, increased prosperity, or materialistic gain, in a rapidly shifting environment is correlated with an erosion in the social norms and values that hold members of the community together. I find this concept to be a paramount one in explaining that Gen Z is facing a social vacuum/void once filled by in-person communities and family rituals. The sea of conflicting contents adds a wave of confusion due to the rapidity and misinformation presented online.

In "Autoethnography: An Overview", Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Aurthur P. Bochner defines "Autoethnography" as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences in order to understand cultural experiences." This genre provides more insight into my topic than a traditional academic approach since it allows me

to link my personal experience with the larger social phenomenon of social media addiction. I will be framing sections of my autoethnography with a short story broken up into multiple sections about my accounts, such as the period during Covid, what my childhood perception of social media usage was like, my attempts at successfully and unsuccessfully getting rid of the addiction, and my childhood perception of social media. I will also include a transcript of an interview with Amanda Hanna McLeer, a former teacher at Edward Murrow High School who is making a documentary about the Brooklyn-based Luddite Club started during the pandemic by Logan Lane, who was then a student at Brooklyn Tech. I will make connections and contrasts between our experiences of social media addiction and reflect on my findings. In doing so, I hope to raise public awareness of how social media addiction and the ability to withdraw impacts Generation Z and previous generations of individuals who are unfamiliar with the distraught that comes about with such a powerful tool.

STOMPING ON THE ADDICTION

NOVEMBER 12, 2024. My room is a modern one with clothes neatly stacked and textbooks locked in their proper position. A cup of oatmeal with walnuts scattered inside, my pencil holder containing mechanical pencils, different shades of Bs, Micron pens, a sharpie. I'm either standing up and walking around or sitting down clenched to the table. I have one of my course textbooks open, or I am writing in my diary, reading a thick book, or even meditating. There are instances where I become self-conscious about my current habits, smiling, "It wasn't this way before."

Even before Covid, I had always gone straight home from school to my phone, watching YouTube for hours on end until my mother would call me for dinner. Then after dinner, I would still go on my phone. Taking a bath or brushing my teeth were an exhausting part of my routine. My mother was strict about me using the phone in public. If I wanted to be entertained for hours on end, I'd have to do that at home. Perhaps it was the tried-and-true method of her parenting that prompted my conscientiousness regarding social media and overall screen time usage.

Covid had exasperated my problem. I was only thirteen years old, in eighth grade when this hurricane of a pandemic came crashing down into New York City. When I realized my middle school was going to be closed during the middle of the school year, my heart skipped, and I was excited to be spending more of my time on games and watching YouTube videos. The class activities had to be moved online, though I didn't get the memo at all. Eighth grade me couldn't wrap his head around what 'learning' from a screen meant. After a while being bored staring at my screen all day, being that academically motivated type of student, I started worrying immensely about my grades. My parents told me not to worry about my grades at that moment, it wasn't a big deal.

All that time being spent indoors, my screentime started to skyrocket. There was nothing much to do. My eyes started straining, and I was getting more paranoid due to lack of peer communication. I'd say there were, for the teenager me, two life-changing moments. One was Covid, and the other was the sudden realization of my downward spiral in technology. Yes, I was self-conscious about how much time I'd spent online. I had other outlets at the time, such as creative writing or sketching. But it was difficult even to maintain pleasure in those skills when social media felt more relieving and fast paced.

All this content didn't fit my way of thinking. I asked myself the question repeatedly. "Would any ambitious and successful individual really be wasting their time doing something as unproductive as scrolling through social media looking for the next big trends?" I'd assert it as a prideful notion firstly as my desire to become a great artist and leave behind a legacy that my ridiculous teenage/older teenage me desired. Another part of me felt all these actions aren't humane enough. I was always imagining and feeding my creativity when waiting in lines or riding the bus, or when seated in class and staring off into space. It was my mind excited by new worlds yet to be conquered, and it was this exploratory and intellectual curiosity that ignited my disdain for the conformist social media lifestyle and that motivated me to try a new lifestyle.

I believe it was during that summer of 24 that I tried once again to quit. I was successful at certain intervals, once going five days without even touching YouTube at all. Instagram, I had gotten rid of long ago; I quit the app after my immaturity led me to make negative comparisons between my visual art and that of industry-level professionals. It didn't last that long. I was still using social media as a type of coping mechanism against boredom when writing became too tough. I couldn't have called myself a Luddite. More like a semi-Luddite, a person who understands the harms of technology, who has successfully gone many days without it, who uses the least harmful social medias, but still has the desire to get in touch, who subconsciously connects with it out of pure instinct.

It wasn't until I went to college that I found out a person whom I was able to connect with that strengthened my affirmation to quit. Their name will be anonymous, but I will just say that their principles aligned with my own, and this made me realize how badly I needed to detox. I never thought in a million years there would be a generation Z individual who hated the abuse of technology as much as I did. This epiphany motivated me to break with my longstanding addiction.

With someone there to reinforce my thoughts, I was able to completely go cold turkey on YouTube by renewing new outlets, socializing, and using Chrome extensions like Cold Turkey to completely shut it down. That which has been my enemy for so long no longer exists.

ANALYSIS

Major Depression Among Teens

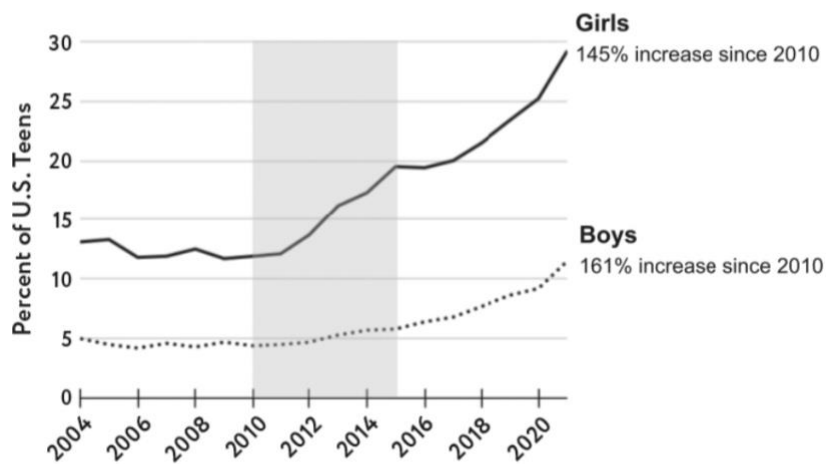


Figure 1.1. Percent of U.S. teens (ages 12–17) who had at least one major depressive episode in the past year, by self-report based on a symptom checklist. This was figure 7.1 in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, now updated with data beyond 2016. (Source: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health.)^[3]

Mental Illness Among College Students

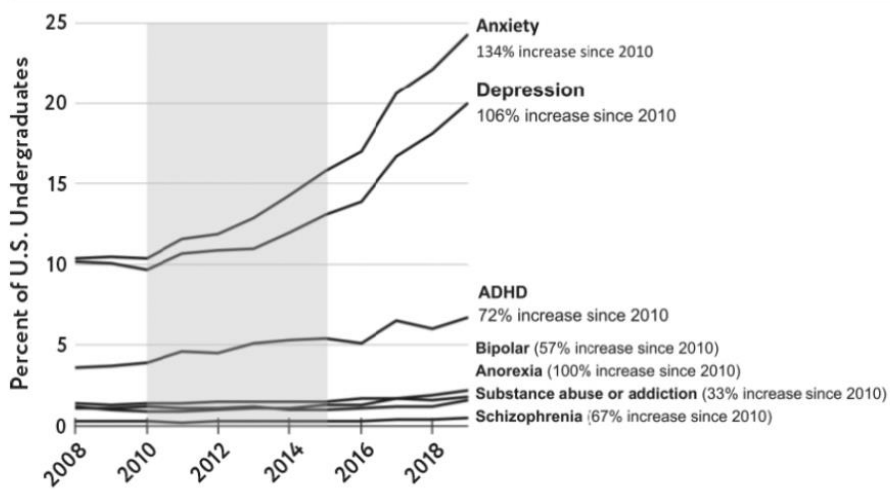


Figure 1.2. Percent of U.S. undergraduates with each of several mental illnesses. Rates of diagnosis of various mental illnesses increased in the 2010s among college students, especially for anxiety and depression. (Source: American College Health Association.)^[9]

Anxiety Prevalence by Age

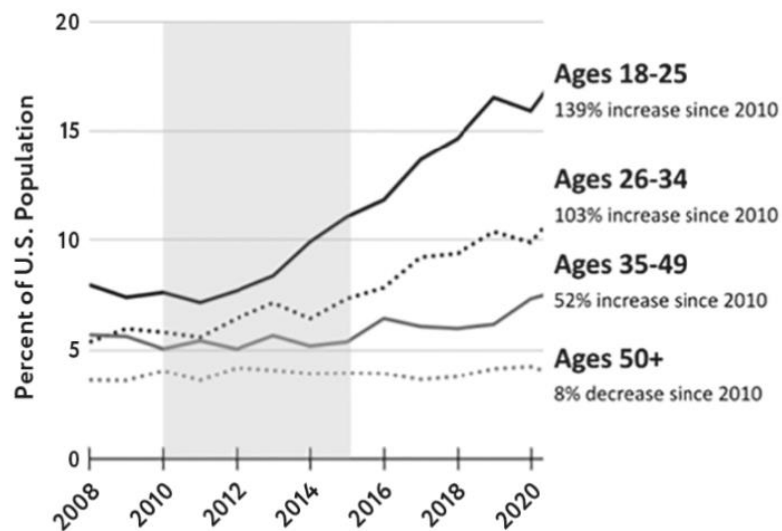


Figure 1.3. Percent of U.S. adults reporting high levels of anxiety by age group. (Source: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health.)^[11]

Daily Time with Friends, by Age Group

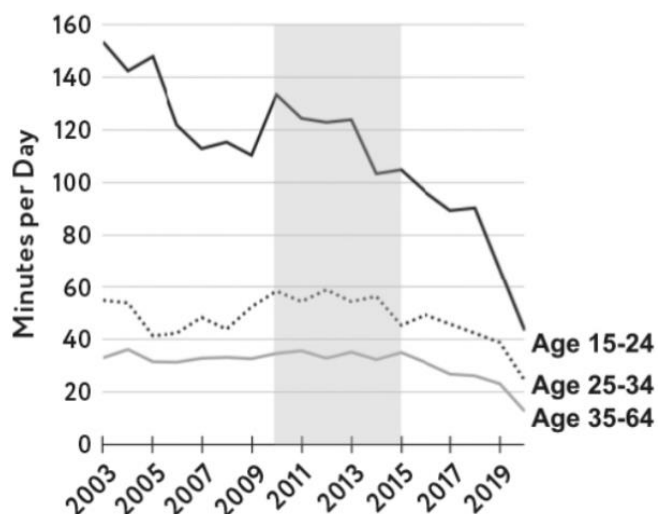


Figure 5.1. Daily average time spent with friends in minutes. Only the youngest age group shows a sharp drop before the 2020 data collection, which was performed after COVID restrictions had begun. (Source: American Time Use Study.)^[19]

I learned from my situation that I'm not alone when it comes to this specific struggle. Social media's devastating effects have been paramount in my understanding of what it takes to appreciate the slower and less flashy lifestyles. As psychologist and NYU professor Jonathan Haidt notes in *The Anxious Generation: How The Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*

A 2012 report on cell phone ownership from Pew Research [found] that in 2011, 77% of American teens had a phone but just 23% had a smartphone. That means most teens had to access social media using a computer. Often it was their parents' computer or the family computer. According to a survey of U.S. parents conducted by the nonprofit Common Sense Media, by 2016, 79% of teens owned a smartphone, as did 28% of children between the ages of 8 and 12. (39)

Haidt links the sharp increase in anxiety and depression among American teens to the increase in their smartphone use, arguing for a causal relationship by generalizing his findings to teens across the globe. As smartphone use increases among teens, their emotional wellness plummets.

As a recovering social media addict, I can attest to the negative effects of social media on mental health. I could only regain my emotional well-being through total abstinence from social media platforms designed to distract my generation, turning them into mindless consumers of content. There is a spectrum of Luddism, which all ultimately falls under the definition of individuals who are against the abuses of technology. On one extreme are individuals who have completely given up the uses of technology, and this ultimately includes the Internet and all tech devices. On the other side are individuals who still have social media platforms but are very critical of their actions and who have the desire to limit the time they spend on these platforms. I fall under the category of using social media promoted by CUNY such as Brightspace and Microsoft Outlook to get in contact with my professors and overall schoolwork. However, outside of that, there is nothing else. All my social media have a very purposeful and direct link into my life that isn't built on pure entertainment.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie is useful in understanding the void that I and many other teens faced during the COVID-19 quarantine, when our routines and activities were abruptly discontinued. Durkheim defined anomie as “the condition in which society provides little guidance to individuals, the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and a community, e.g. under unruly scenarios resulting in fragmentation of social identity and rejection of self-regulatory values” and he described it as “derangement, an insatiable will, the malady of the infinite.” (257) While he attributed it to the early nineteenth-century advances in industrialization, working within the same period that the original Luddites emerged, I will link it to the pandemic, which exacerbated social media addiction. What happens when the rituals and social institutions that once gave our lives meaning are replaced by the relentless proliferation of feeds and reels? The individual surrenders to the viral norm of “anything goes” and competes for

likes and followers in a restless attention economy. In my case, I suffered from “shiny object syndrome,” leapfrogging to different platforms in pursuit of unattainable goals and burning out in the process. Although it may connect people from different parts of the world, social media isn’t very social; it is a source and a symptom of anomie.

Fahrenheit 451, a novel written in 1953 by Ray Bradbury, explores the conflict of an individual whose job is to burn books in a society whose citizens consume fast-paced, mindless entertainment. Bradbury’s fictional dystopia anticipates our social media-saturated landscape and the decline in reading it accelerated. Montag, the protagonist of the story, is a fireman, and his sole job is to burn books because by government standards they are seen as warping citizens’ minds. Montag, after many years of burning books, finally takes the risk of reading. He has become dissatisfied with the compulsory mindlessness of his society after the deaths of three women: the dreamy Clarisse, an anonymous woman who chose to be burnt alive with the stash of books she had kept hidden from the police, and Mildred, his wife, who seems vacuously happy until one day, she decides to commit suicide by swallowing huge doses of sleeping pills. When Montag comes to understand that books are forbidden because the government doesn’t want its citizens thinking critically or feeling too much, he rebels in a confrontation with Captain Beatty, burning him alive and knocking out the other firemen. With the help of Professor Faber, he escapes across a river that takes him to an area of individuals who are like-minded who understand the importance and power of books.

When Montag asks Clarisse why she wasn’t at school like all the other kids—when he met her, she was wandering around— she says "Oh, they don't miss me. I'm anti-social, they say. I don't mix. It's so strange. I'm very social indeed. It all depends on what you mean by social, doesn't it? Social to me means talking about things like this." (59) Unlike her peers, who like my

generation have social lives that revolve around technology, Clarisse prefers to go on nature walks and looks at the world with a sense of wonder. Clarisse's assumption that social life derives from curiosity and connection with the natural world is shared by Gen Z Luddites.

INTERVIEW WITH AMANDA HANNA MCLEER

Amanda Hanna McLeer is a former teacher at Edward Murrow High School and the writer, director, and producer of a documentary-in-progress about the Luddite Club, which she states will be seen by audiences in early 2026. My interview is part of the autoethnography project and gives an educator's perspective on the Luddite Club.

McLeer described her attempt to recover from social media addiction. Like me, she tried many methods that didn't work and tried to find a balance before finally getting rid of her smartphone in 2021, replacing it with a flip phone. (I, on the other hand, never bought a flip phone, but I related to her descriptions of useless methods, remembering how I'd lock my phone in my drawers or put it under my bed). Both of us found online interactions to be flat and sought a psychic distance from technology.

McLeer gave more background information on Logan Lane, one of the creators of the Club. Logan was heavily on social media during the pandemic that became exasperated when remote schooling came into effect. She was able to commit to her principles of not an iPhone at the age of sixteen. The Luddite club originated when Logan Lane and Jameson Butler met at a punk show. Logan didn't have a phone, while Jameson had a flip phone. The two of them bonded and end up deciding to create the Luddite Club, which started out Brooklyn-based but has expanded globally ever since.

At the interview, I asked three questions that I consider most important to my research. I will list these below, along with edited versions of McLeer's responses.

1. What different patterns of abstinence existed within the group? Logan abstained from smartphones, but were there members who abstained only from social media platforms like Instagram and Tik Tok?

"I like to call it a spectrum of Luddism. You have someone like Logan who in the beginning of her journey had no cell phone and no social media accounts. Now she has a flip phone, but she still doesn't have her social media accounts. So that's kind of on, like, one extreme. The other side of that are Luddites who have social media, have smart phones, but they're deeply critical of the attention economy...they're critical of social media, of smart technology, and they're trying to create a better relationship with tech." (5:50-6:32)

2. From the perspective of The Luddite Club, what does it mean to live a fuller, more humane life, and what role does smartphone abstinence play in this?

"Logan talked a lot about this in the New York Times podcasts where she talks about her journey into Luddism...it was very in when she was on social media to look like you didn't care about social media because the early days of social media were about the best pictures, the best lighting, trying to look a certain way, trying to establish a kind of persona...Logan realized that even though she was trying to make it seem like she didn't care, she deeply cared, and so she was curating that image. If you're curating an image of who you are, what you do, what you like, that's not authentic. It takes time to curate that type of persona...if you change your mind about what you like, you have this record that you changed your mind rather than being this authentic fluid

human being who can change and grow, social media takes that experience and puts it up for everyone to see online.” (19:16-20:28)

3. According to statistics, girls’ mental health has been more adversely affected by social media than boys.’ What was the gender demographic within the club?

“It’s mostly young women, and it’s interesting because Logan always says that social media affects young women more...the body image, the dysmorphia...it’s definitely rooted in pop culture, magazines...even before social media there’s magazines, television telling you how to look. Young women are more affected by social media than young boys. But, there’s a good representation of young men in the Luddite club now... For a long time it was mostly women.” (26:26-27:14)

AN AFTERNOON WITH THE LUDDITE CLUB

For this autoethnography, I participated in fieldwork, systematically collecting data from direct interactions with the Luddites. I wanted to get an overview of how the Luddites themselves interacted and learn more about the psychological change that develops in individuals who abstain from social media addiction.

November 24, 2024: It was around one o’clock when I arrived at the Brooklyn Public Library right next to Prospect Park and the Grand Plaza. I still had time on my hands, so I ventured into a library that I have never visited before. It was humongous, their collections more abundant than those of the five other libraries I had visited. Unfortunately, I was only able to skim the literature and language learning section until it was 1:30PM and I got out of the library and onto the steps. I was studying my notebook that I brought, skimming over my French sentence structures while I waited.

The Luddites meet on the steps of the Brooklyn Public Library next to Prospect Park and the Grand Plaza. I was very early; at 2:00pm, they would arrive to arrive in bunches. I called Amanda, who unfortunately was unable to come during 11/24/24 due to an emergency but was able to provide me with Lucy's phone number. It wasn't until 2:30pm when I saw the group, some of whom had bikes. I was hesitant at first. I didn't know if these were the Luddites. A group of individuals who didn't use social media. Hard to tell. I sat near them and called the number, at which Lucy answered. "Hello, is this Lucy Luddite?" I called behind their back. The group turned to face me, and I smiled then and there.

It was bigger than I'd thought. At this time, it was around six students. There was also a college student there who had to do interviews for her own project, so in total, there were eight people. I clearly see it as majority girls and Caucasians, though I didn't mind at all the demographics. I just wanted to know what they were like. A woman parked her bike outside the cold windy weather and asked us if we could look after it. I was a bit impatient and wanted to take some action, so I decided to introduce myself first. Very typical types of conversation. I felt an adrenaline rush, as is typical when meeting strangers for the first time. I asked them to introduce their hobbies. Some of them said they liked art: drawing, painting, singing, writing poems. A girl who was a senior wanted to be a math major. Jameson seems to love drawing, and the college student, a twenty-year-old who had abstained from social media for the most part since the age of fourteen, took pictures of her work.

After the woman who had parked the bike thanked us for looking after it, members of the Luddite Club filed into the library. I was hoping we could explore the wooded area of Prospect Park, but since I agreed that it was too cold, I followed the others. We sat down on the first table right in front of us. I scooted onto my seat, and they theirs.

I asked how they were adjusting to limited or no social media access. Jameson said that once she got rid of her smartphone, she could never be happier. There were only three kids in the club who had flip phones, which constituted the extreme of the Luddite scale. On the other end of the Luddite spectrum were those who were conscientious social media users; they tried to limit their time on the apps and be mindful about the effects of social media on themselves and others. Many of the Luddites were still eating lamb gyros or chicken over rice in the library. I just wanted to spark conversations. We talked about a variety of topics. Lucy showed me their flip phone and Jameson talked about the importance of imagination. She considered social media saturated with content and declared that the best form of entertainment was reading, because it “produces the right amount of dopamine for the brain.” Getting off tech was the best decision she had ever made. I couldn’t agree more. The college student pulled aside Jameson and Lucy for an interview, so after our brief conversation, I did not have the chance to ask them follow-up questions.

The conversations I had with the other Luddites lasted from 2:30pm to 5pm. Two more students arrived, which overall made ten teens who gathered that afternoon. Ten students in the Club were absent, bringing the number of teens in the Club to eighteen, not counting myself and the other college student. I was amazed by the thoughtfulness they used in speaking, the consideration they gave each other, and the fearlessness with which they embraced individual quirks. No one spoke over one another; everyone listened. I wondered if abstinence from social media had made them more attune to each other’s thoughts and emotions. One girl, a soft-spoken sophomore, had a skateboard that on the underside looked way too cool. Curly blond bangs that covered her face to where I couldn’t make out her eyes. I asked if she liked rock music and she replied, “Why does everyone say that?” The only other male in the Club that day was the last one to arrive, and he spoke so softly that I could barely hear him. He had a bike helmet, along with

many of the others. McLeer had mentioned that being off social media had improved her capacity to navigate physical space, so it was no coincidence that most of the Luddites got around by bike.

It appears Brooklyn Tech is really teaching these students well. While I was studying introductory Microeconomics, they were studying Macroeconomics, even though they were only a quarter of the way through the school year. The girl who sat next to me was born in Russia and sounds like a native English speaker; she was reading a book entirely in Russian. The girl across from me wore wide earrings. For a while we talked about the implications of languages going extinct, an exciting topic for all of us. She told me that has a little sister who is extremely addicted to social media and that her parents were stricter this time around; they wouldn't let her install an app without their permission. I hesitated to intrude on the conversation of two other girls, one of whom who loves to cook to relieve stress and the other who enjoys skateboarding. Although I didn't get the chance to converse at length with these two, I was still proud of myself for having engaged with all nine of them. I don't like the silence, so I was glad to be surrounded by people in deep conversation. When I say it, these individuals can converse on a wide range of topics. They seemed too clear-headed to be distracted by viral content online. There was no talk of a YouTube video. No chat revolving around a video game. Just kids who are as curious about the world and as imaginative as I am.

When it was time to leave, I said my farewell and waved, and they did as well. I disappeared into the cold streets, ecstatic to have met them. On the sidewalk, there were individuals giving out free turkey, as it would soon be Thanksgiving. I took a heavy twenty-pound turkey, took the B26 bus back home, and ruminated on my encounter. It was a great day! Meeting creative, imaginative teens had given me hope of a life beyond social media anomie.

CONCLUSION

“Can I have your Instagram?” a girl asked.

“Sorry, I don’t have Instagram.” I replied calmly.

“Oh, what social media platforms do you use?”

The question made me pause. She was not referring to Brightspace or CUNY First; she more likely had Instagram, X, and TikTok in mind. “I don’t use social media,” I said, smiling.

This type of interaction is quite common in my life now. When peers ask for my username on Instagram, I reply with a simple “Sorry, don’t have.” If they were to ask why, then they are in for a treat, as I get to rehash my main points on the pitfalls of social media, inauthenticity being on the top of my list.

Something truly life-changing occurred when I decided to quit the apps; it was as if all the energy I had wasted on screentime came rushing back. I had more stamina and a more focused mindset. I wasn’t easily distracted, and most importantly, I was more sociable with peers and professors. So when I sit on the bus, instead of mindlessly scrolling, I explore my curiosity by observing my surroundings, think about what I learned in my classes, or hum to music I’ve created. If someone were to ask me what I do with all the time social media abstinence has freed, I would respond like Clarisse: “... sometimes I just sit and think” (Bradbury 53). The more time passes, the more committed I am to living authentically, without filters.

Before I began writing this autoethnography, I never thought that I would find so many in my generation who thought the same way I did. I thought I was only one individual among an extremely small percentage of those who wanted more than immediate gratification, who thought

what it means to really be human and who wanted to interact with the people sitting next to them, uninterrupted by the *ding* of a notification from Instagram. Yet many of my generation are not exactly enthusiastic about Luddism. Even if they recognize that their social media addiction is problematic, they may be too apathetic to change. I have been advocating for the importance of using technology as a tool and not as something to be abused. It is difficult even for those friends I have closest to me to change their minds when dealing with an addiction that is so normalized, ingrained in the culture of everyday living.

Readers of this autoethnography who are struggling with social media addiction would benefit from being more mindful about their technology use, reflecting on how it distorts human experiences, limits the range of emotions, and pits people against each other. They can begin by having an honest conversation with themselves about how addicted they are and decide where to position themselves on the spectrum of Ludditism. Three of the Luddites I observed in my fieldwork have substituted smartphones with flip phones that have limited texting capacities (texts cannot be received from Iphone and Android users). These may not be ideal for those whose livelihood depends on smartphone access, but it is not the only alternative. Tracking screen time promotes more conscientious use, and many tech companies have begun to capitalize on our desire to take back our agency from Big Tech with apps designed to block social media apps. Smartphone apps designed to counteract the harmful effects of other smartphone apps may seem counterintuitive until we remember that the original Luddites were not opposed to technological progress, but to how it was being used to exploit the working class.

Maintaining connections with supportive in-person communities is one of the best ways for an individual to recover from social media addiction because they can provide us with the social validation we need without requiring us to sacrifice our flexibility and openness to other

points of view. The flip side of anomie for Durkheim was what he called “collective effervescence,” the joy experienced by people when they participate in collective rituals that require the coordinated movement of bodies—ceremonies, rituals, celebrations. In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), he compared the emotion to “an exceptionally powerful” stimulant and linked it to the development and survival of the human species: “.. once the individuals are gathered, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and that quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation” (217-218). While Durkheim was writing about the first human societies, he could as well have been describing the Luddite Club. Collective effervescence is what our overreliance on social media deprives of us and what we need to reclaim, one community at a time.

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