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Persuasion

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The Persuasive Content of *The Social Dilemma*

The new Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma* (directed by Jeff Orlowski), has recently taken the internet by storm. Even before being assigned to watch it, I heard a lot about the film and the revelations it caused through its message of the harmful effects of social media and the unethical behaviors of the companies behind them. After watching the film, I can even admit that I followed some of the advice presented by the speakers. This is all to say that the film has been incredibly successful at persuading its audience; but what is it that makes the documentary so persuasive? *The Social Dilemma* succeeds in persuading its audience through its utilization of: ethos, pathos, and logos, credibility and social attractiveness, peripheral cues, central cues, and audience involvement, and argument sidedness. Through all of these persuasive methods, the film's ultimate goal is to inform its audience on the dark side of social media and push for a change in the industry.

To start off, *The Social Dilemma* uses ethos, pathos, and logos to have a greater influence on its audience. The film uses ethos by letting the audience know the experience and expertise of the speakers shown in the film. When each person is introduced, it also shows various titles they have held in the social media industry, including engineers for Facebook and Google, Twitter executive, and even Pinterest president. Showing the audience how deeply tied the speakers are to the social media industry goes a long way in making the arguments they present persuasive, as you immediately know that they know what they are talking about. The film uses pathos by

touching upon sensitive topics in the world right now and showing how they are linked with social media. Mental health and civil unrest are two very important and prevalent topics in modern society, and by showing the audience how they are tied to social media use, it immediately tugs on the viewers' heartstrings and makes them want to find out how to change that. Logos is used through the strong messages given throughout the film. For example, when Tim Kendall, former president of Pinterest, is asked what he's most worried about, he responds, "I think, in the... in the shortest time horizon... civil war" (Orlowski, 1:20:10 - 1:20:20).

Arguing that social media could eventually lead America down a path where the country tears itself apart is an incredibly strong claim, and as a result, the viewer has no choice but to keep watching.

Additionally, the speakers themselves seem more trustworthy through their credibility and social attractiveness. The credibility of the speakers is very much tied with the film's ethos. It would be one thing for some guy to come on screen and tell us that social media is bad; it is another thing entirely for some of the most influential members of the tech industry to break down the innocent beginnings of social media, where it went wrong, and what it could possibly lead to if we are not careful. This insight into the industry that the speakers have goes a long way in making them seem more trustworthy. In addition, they seem more persuasive through their social attractiveness. During my viewing of the film, I could not help but like these people; it seemed very noble of them to leave such a lucrative industry and expose its dark secrets. The idea that they followed their moral compass rather than chased dollar signs makes them seem so much more likeable and trustworthy, making it much easier to listen to them.

Furthermore, this documentary relies pretty heavy on peripheral cues to draw the viewer in. The biggest peripheral cue of the whole film is the dramatized story of the family. In

between the interviews with tech moguls and presenting of statistics, the film portrays the fictional story of a family that is disrupted in various ways by social media use. For example, the younger daughter has a poor sense of self due to her conflation of online likes with her self-esteem, and as a result, she becomes insecure about the size of her ears and only feels comfortable posting pictures with filters attached (38:03 - 39:00). Another example is the brother: as he becomes more addicted to his phone, he becomes more socially withdrawn, not even able to hold a conversation while sitting next to his friend (20:00 - 21:29) or talk to the girl he likes (1:05:26 - 1:05:48). Finally, at the climax of the family's story, the son ventures out to a dangerous protest after being radicalized by political ads, and both he and his older sister end up getting arrested (1:13:10 - 1:13:55). These peripheral cues, while not as concrete as facts and statistics, do a good job of pulling the viewer in and giving a visual representation of social media's potential consequences.

While the peripheral cues do a good job of illustrating the potential negative effects of social media, the real meat-and-potatoes come from the central cues. These occur when the experts bring up real-life complex issues and statistics that are real food for thought. Going back to the example of the younger sister's self-esteem: after the acted out segment, a set of data is presented showing the rise in cases of non-fatal self-harm in young girls, and another is shown portraying the rise in suicide rates in young girls (40:28 - 53:22). Also going back to the example of the brother: before the segment of his inability to converse with his friend, former Google design ethicist, Tristan Harris, and Tim Kendall explain how easy it is for social media to figure out who you are, what you like, and keep your attention directed on it (18:10 - 20:00). Also, before the segment of the brother at the protest, videos of real-life violent protests are shown that include people being attacked, and even footage of people being run over by a car, all because of

political radicalization (1:12:48 - 1:13:09). While the peripheral cues are effective at drawing the audience in and painting a picture for them, the central cues are more effective at showing the real-world effects that really matter.

Along with peripheral and central cues, the film touts the audience's personal involvement with the subject matter to be persuasive. Early on in the film, it lets the audience know right away that there are roughly 2 billion people who use social media (09:19), immediately letting us know that almost a quarter of the world is directly connected with the problem. Furthermore, Tristan Harris, during a U.S. Senate hearing on persuasive technology, demonstrates how even if you are not involved with social media at all, it can still have a negative impact: "This affects everyone, even if you don't use these products. These things have become digital Frankensteins that are terraforming the world in their image, whether it's the mental health of children or our politics and our political discourse, without taking responsibility for taking over the public square" (1:18:49 - 1:19:08). Harris is making the point that even if you do not use social media, it has the potential to disrupt the mental health of your children and create political chaos. As a result, not only does this issue affect the roughly 2 billion social media users in the world, it also affects society at large; by letting the audience know that they are all connected with the problem, it greatly increases the chance that they will engage with the content of the film.

Finally, we get to sidedness; throughout the film, the speakers mostly present a one-sided argument. However, there are some instances of going over opposing ideas. For example, Tristan Harris mentions the idea that "There's this narrative that, you know, 'We'll just adapt to it. We'll learn how to live with these devices, just like we've learned how to live with everything else'" (44:46 - 44:53). This is a commonly held belief, even being held by a speaker at the Chicago

Anti-Trust Tech Conference (44:16 - 44:46). Despite this being a commonly held belief, Randy Fernando, former product manager for Nvidia, explains how this is not true: “Roughly, if you say from, like, the 1960s to today, processing power has gone up about a trillion times. Nothing else that we have has improved at anything near that rate... And perhaps most importantly, our human -- our physiology, our brains have evolved not at all” (45:05 - 45:31). By building up a persuasive argument on the other side, and proving it to be a flawed argument, the film makes its own argument seem even stronger. The film does not have many instances of this, but when they use this tactic, it proves to be quite effective.

It has been established up to this point that *The Social Dilemma* uses many paths of persuasiveness and is quite effective in doing so; but at the end of the day, what is the point of it all? Ultimately, the film has two goals: to inform you of the dark side of social media and to get you to push for a change. The documentary spends most of its time informing you of the far-reaching consequences of social media, but dedicates the entirety of its conclusion to explaining why the business model of these companies incentivise profit over ethics, how regulations and changes in the industry are necessary to prevent further harm, and that there is no other alternative if we want the state of the world to trend in a positive direction (1:21:28 - 1:29:14). The film’s speakers even give actionable advice that people can follow to make immediate improvements as the credits are rolling (1:29:22 - 1:33:17). As I stated above in the introduction, I took this film’s messaging to heart; to say that I was persuaded by this film is an understatement. During the end credits, I followed some of the advice given by the speakers right away, including downloading a browser on my phone that does not track my data and reducing the number of apps that can give me notifications. Despite the film’s persuasive impact on me, it would be disingenuous to say that I was not already on board with the film’s ideas before

watching it. In fact, according to Social Judgement Theory, I would have been in a latitude of acceptance with the film's message. Just a few weeks ago, I deleted the Instagram app off of my phone because I was starting to get really bothered by how easily I could just start mindlessly scrolling through pictures that I have no real interest in rather than getting work done or doing things I actually enjoy. Despite my preconceived agreeance with the subject matter, I believe this film is an important one; many people do not realize what social media is doing to them or to society at large, and even if someone does not come away from the film as convinced as I am, the more people who are kept informed on this topic, the better.

The Social Dilemma is a film that attempts to persuade its audience on the negative consequences of social media, and it is largely successful in doing so. The film has many different factors that increase its level of persuasiveness, and in the end, they all work toward the ultimate goal of informing the audience of the dark side of social media, why it occurs, and how to make changes for the better. While I only initially watched this film for the purpose of writing this paper, I am glad to have watched a film that is so seemingly important, not only for modern society, but for the future as well.

Work Cited

Orlowski, Jeff. (2020). *The Social Dilemma* [Film]. Netflix.