

# A Stoic Reflection on Contemporary Social Media

J.K. van der Vlist



Student no.: 388361

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Department of Philosophy

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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Mentor: dr. A.W. Prins

Advisor: dr. P. Schuurman

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## **Abstract**

The prevalent mental health issues of particularly younger generations are often being ascribed to contemporary social media usage. Since some of the key notions of contemporary cognitive behavioural therapies, which are often employed to battle mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, can be traced back to ancient Stoic philosophy, this thesis aims at critically reflecting on social media practices from a Stoic perspective. By applying Stoic philosophy to three problematic and typical social media phenomena (envy, judging and fear of missing out), the arising discrepancies are being discussed. Due to the apparent incongruities, a different kind of approach to our interconnected existence is argued for.

**Keywords:** cognitive behavioural therapies, Stoicism, social media



**For *sophia***  
the highest virtue

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## **Preface**

During the spring of 2017, I first came into contact with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. At the time, I was a beginning philosophy student who doubted about the usefulness of such a therapy for me. However, when I did some research about these therapies, I discovered that the fundamental notions on which these therapies are based, can be traced back to ancient Stoic philosophy. I had only had one lecture about Stoic philosophy and, ironically enough, I spent most of that lecture being angry due to an argument I had prior to that lecture. After the discovery of the philosophical roots of these therapies, I decided to buy some Stoic literature. Soon, I realized that my way of acting and thinking was at times diametrically opposed to what the Stoics suggested would lead to a happy life. After a while, I began applying the Stoic wisdoms in all kinds of situations and I started to experience improvements with regard to how I dealt with them.

I do not think I am the only one who sees the benefits of adopting a Stoic attitude in our modern lives. There currently is a resurgence in the popularity of Stoicism. In recent years, there have been multiple Stoic best-sellers, annual Stoic weeks have been organised at universities and Stoicism is even the talk of the tech-town Silicon Valley. My adviser dr. P Schuurman rightfully pointed out that one of the reasons Stoic philosophy may be so appealing to many, could lie in the fact that the selfish character of Stoicism is very compatible with the highly individualised lifestyles of internet millennials. Although the Stoics had a slightly different conception of what happiness entails than many people do today, they also held every person accountable for their own happiness. However, this happiness is not easily achieved according to the Stoics. Nevertheless, the Stoic philosophy does provide very powerful 'tools' that will come in 'handy' in all kinds of contemporary situations.

Being a communication and media graduate, I also applied my newly acquired Stoic wisdoms to my academic field. I noticed a lot of incongruities between the ways we use social media and the desired Stoic attitudes. Hence, I decided to combine my academic interest for the purpose of a bachelor thesis and this is the result.





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## Introduction

The internet has made our lives much easier in many ways. We can do all sorts of things online. We can buy anything online, from clothes to groceries and from holidays to cryptocurrencies. We can educate ourselves online, for instance through online news sources or MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course). We also entertain ourselves online; we stream movies and music through online platforms. The possibilities of the internet are virtually limitless. One of the most important affordances<sup>1</sup> of the internet, however, is being able to communicate with each other, 'to stay in touch'. Whereas the physical postcard made way for the email, nowadays social media have grown to be, arguably, the most important means of (mediated) communication. According to their own statistics, as of March 2018, Facebook has 2.2 billion monthly active users of which 1.45 billion visit their platform on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the photo-sharing application Instagram has over 800 million monthly users of which the majority (500+ million) use the platform every day.<sup>3</sup> Although individual social media platforms can be subject to varying popularity, it seems like social media in general have grown to play an indispensable role in many of our lives.<sup>4</sup>

Social media platforms, and in particular Social Networking Sites, are praised for many things. Not only is it easier to contact and 'follow' family and friends wherever they might be on this globe, social media are predominantly praised for how they allow for community building. This applies to people living in remote areas, ethnic minority populations and marginalised or vulnerable social groups such as the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>5</sup> By facilitating the connection with peers or like-minded people, social media do not merely serve a communal purpose but often transcend it. In this way, the use of social media can be employed in all sort of environments. To illustrate: social media are helpful for

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of affordance has been introduced by James Gibson to account for "how various users may perceive and therefore use the same object, such as a rock or a door handle, in widely different ways" (Cited from Emmanuelle Vaast and Evgeny Kaganer, "Social Media Affordances and Governance in the Workplace: An examination of organizational policies," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19: 79).

<sup>2</sup> "Company Info," Facebook, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>; These are the most recent quarterly figures. Facebook has since been involved in a privacy scandal. However, for the purpose of this thesis, it is not relevant to discuss it.

<sup>3</sup> "Our Story," Instagram, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://instagram-press.com/our-story/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kaya Yurieff, "Snapchat stock loses \$1.3 billion after Kylie Jenner tweet," *CNN*, February 23, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Royal Society for Public Health, "Status of Mind: Social media And young people's mental health and wellbeing", 2017, 14, <https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/62be270a-a55f-4719-ad668c2ec7a74c2a.pdf>; LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. The + sign is generally added to include other sexualities as well.

communication in health care environments.<sup>6</sup> Besides emotional support, social media allow patients to engage with health experts or people with similar diagnoses, sometimes leading to improved health outcomes. In addition to maintaining friendships, experiencing a sense of community, obtaining access to all sorts of information and gaining emotional support, people also use social media as valuable means to express themselves. Posting pictures, sharing thoughts and liking (or disliking) other people's content is what social media are all about. Through social media people constitute their own identities, or at least try to shape a favourable narrative about themselves, primarily to be perceived by others.

Whereas the interconnectedness that social media offer has opened doors for many people and brought them together, people are beginning to see that it also takes its toll. Sherry Turkle, a renowned professor at MIT, who, in her own words, used to "celebrate our lives on the internet",<sup>7</sup> now paints a less favourable picture of the effects of our interconnected digital lives. In *Alone Together*, which has become a much-cited work in the academic fields of communication and psychology, Turkle argues that the substitution of many of our 'real' forms of contact by mediated digital contact, has a harmful impact on how we relate with each other.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, she argues, we are more connected with others than we have ever been, yet we lose the capacity to really connect with each other which ultimately makes us feel lonelier. Similar worries come from Jean Twenge, a generational researcher, who states that there is compelling evidence that smartphones and social media have a harmful impact on the mental health of the generation that comes after the Millennials, which she has coined generation 'iGen'.<sup>9</sup> This generation is made up of so-called digital natives, people who have grown up in the digital age and often cannot remember life before the internet. It is also people from these younger generations who happen to be most represented on social media platforms. In her research, Twenge has

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<sup>6</sup> Royal Society for Public Health, "Status of Mind," 13; See also: S. Anne Moorhead et al., "A New Dimension of Health Care: Systematic Review of the Uses, Benefits, and Limitations of Social Media for Health Communication", *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 15, no. 4 (2013): e85, doi:10.2196/jmir.1933.

<sup>7</sup> Sherry Turkle, "Connected, but alone?," TED video, 19:42, filmed February 2012, [https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry\\_turkle\\_alone\\_together](https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together); Turkle's more optimistic works regarding technology include *The Second Self* (1984) and *Life on the Screen* (1995).

<sup>8</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). *Passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?," *The Atlantic*, September 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>.

found that “teens who spend more time on screens are more likely to be depressed, and those who spend more time on nonscreen activities are less likely to be depressed”.<sup>10</sup> In addition, her research shows a dramatic deterioration of the mental health of teens in general; depression and suicide among teenagers have increased a lot, they sleep less and are feeling lonelier.<sup>11</sup> Twenge’s American findings seem to correspond with findings from the United Kingdom, where the use of social media is linked to increased chances of anxiety and depression as well as having a negative body image.<sup>12</sup> On top of that, ‘quarter life-crises’<sup>13</sup> and burn-outs (for instance among students)<sup>14</sup> are widely discussed in the public debate. Equally, phenomena such as ‘FoMO’ (Fear of Missing Out), a term which is used to describe the experience of feeling like having to do as much as possible to avoid feeling left out or missing anything, are increasingly being researched and studied in terms of its effect on mental health.<sup>15</sup> In short, there are worrying signals about the mental health of particularly younger generations. On the one hand, depression, anxiety, stress and burnouts seem to be becoming more prevalent, and on the other hand, more time is spent connected online and on social media platforms.

One of the main approaches that is being employed to battle such forms of psychological disorders as mentioned above, is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).<sup>16</sup> Cognitive behavioural therapies have become the predominant form of modern psychological therapy, in all probability mainly due to two important factors.<sup>17</sup> Not only are cognitive behavioural therapies highly cost-effective, there also exists a lot of research supporting the effectiveness of these evidence-based methods.<sup>18</sup> Although there are multiple variations of CBT, what they have in common is that all assume that (1) cognitive

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<sup>10</sup> Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 82.

<sup>11</sup> Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”

<sup>12</sup> Royal Society for Public Health, “Status of Mind,” 8-10.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Young, “More than half of Millennials are going through a 'Quarter-Life Crisis',” *The Independent*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/millennials-quarter-live-crisis-half-25-35-finance-career-property-first-direct-a8253036.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Jeanine Duijst, “Zelfs mijn ouders weten niet van mijn burn-out,” *NOS*, October 21, 2017, <https://nos.nl/op3/artikel/2198942-zelfs-mijn-ouders-weten-niet-van-mijn-burn-out.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Jon D. Elhai et al., “Fear of missing out, need for touch, anxiety and depression are related to problematic smartphone use”, *Computers in Human Behavior* 63 (2016): 509-516, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.079>.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), xi-xii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* xi.

activity influences behaviour and that (2) cognitive activity can be changed, which subsequently (3) can result in changes in behaviour.<sup>19</sup> In other words, these therapies are aimed at changing people's thoughts or perceptions concerning matters and events in the hope of bringing about a positive change in behaviour or the experience of the matter at hand. The most famous and influential forms of CBT are Albert Ellis' Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy and Aaron Beck's cognitive therapy. Both these and other forms of CBT have proven to be successful and are widely recommended for combatting depression and anxiety-related disorders.<sup>20</sup>

Some of the key notions of these contemporary forms of CBT, can be traced back to ancient Stoic philosophy. Both Ellis and Beck are very explicit about the Stoic philosophical origins of their cognitive therapies.<sup>21</sup> While this acknowledgement might come across as remarkable at first, it really is not. In ancient history, and particularly in the Hellenistic period, when someone would suffer from a physical discomfort, they would visit a doctor; when, on the other hand, the problem was of psychological nature, they would visit a philosopher.<sup>22</sup> Chrysippus of Soli (c. 279 – c. 206 BC), one of the early expanders of Stoicism, called the work of philosophers that of the "physician of the soul".<sup>23</sup> The Stoic art of living is thus a very practical philosophy since it essentially prescribes the manner in which is ought to be acted and thought. The ultimate goal for a Stoic is to live a happy life, one that is free of destructive and negative emotions. The Stoics held a cognitive view of emotion; they believed that negative emotions, or rather 'passions', such as anger and envy are the result of fallacious thinking and are therefore irrational and can be avoided.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the Stoic art of living advocates to accept the things which are beyond our control. According to Stoicism, only when things that are out of reach are accepted and complete control is gained over thoughts, emotions and desires, a happy and free life can be attained.<sup>25</sup>

Following this line of thought, starting with the worrying signals about the mental health of particularly younger generations and how these issues are often being ascribed to

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<sup>19</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* xi.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>22</sup> Miriam van Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst: Evenveel geluk als wijsheid* (Leusden: ISVW Uitgevers, 2017), 16.

<sup>23</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, xix.

<sup>24</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, trans. Elizabeth Carter (Massachusetts: The Internet Classics Archive, n.d.), §1, <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>.

contemporary social media usage and, subsequently, from cognitive behavioural therapies which are employed to treat mental health issues to their Stoic philosophical underpinnings, there is sufficient ground for a philosophical reflection. A reflection in which key themes and values of an ancient philosophy that is more than two millennia old, are being applied to the widespread contemporary usage of the technologically advanced social media.

Therefore the main question this thesis aims to answer is how do Stoic philosophy and everyday behaviour on social media platforms relate to each other? What is there to be learned from the Stoic art of life? Could Stoics, for example, have used social media if they were available at the time and if so, how? Can their cognitive view of emotions improve our mental health, or rather: keep our minds healthy? The remainder of this thesis will be subdivided into three parts. I will first proceed to delineate the Stoic philosophy more elaborately in Part I. Subsequently, I will apply the Stoic philosophy to typical, everyday social media practices in Part II. In the last part of this thesis (III), I will draw conclusions from the incongruities that might arise and aim at sufficiently answering the questions posed in this introduction as well as argue for a different kind of approach to our interconnected existence.

## Part I

### 1.1 Stoic Literature

Before outlining the Stoic art of living in further detail, I want to spend some words justifying the choice of literature on which this thesis is based. Much of what we know today of Stoic philosophy has survived through the last ‘wave’ of Stoics so to speak, often called the “late” or “Roman Stoa”. During the Roman Empire, Stoicism was widespread and became one of the major philosophical schools.<sup>26</sup> It is also during this time that the most famous and best-read Stoics were alive. Among these are of course Seneca (c. 4 BC – AD 65), Epictetus (AD c. 55 – 135) and emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius (AD 121 – 180).<sup>27</sup> While writing a thesis on Stoic philosophy, I found it very important to consult some of their original works. These original works will mostly be employed when applying Stoicism to contemporary social media usage. Arguably, the most important Stoic work is Epictetus’ *Enchiridion*, which translates to *Handbook*. Strictly speaking, Epictetus did not write this book, his student Arrian of Nicomedia (AD c. 86 – 160) compiled it, based on his lectures.<sup>28</sup> It forms a concise overview of what the Stoic philosophy entails. It is full of Stoic teachings, and as the name suggest, it contains knowledge every Stoic should have ‘at hand’. Besides the *Enchiridion*, two of Seneca’s writings, *Of a Happy Life (De Vita Beata)* and *On the Shortness of Life (De Brevitate Vitae)*, have been consulted. In addition to original Stoic works, three books which appeared more recently have been examined. *How to be a Stoic* by Massimo Pigliucci, *Stoïcijnsse levenskunst* by Miriam van Reijen and *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)* by Donald Robertson. Whereas the former two books serve as modern introductions to the ancient Stoic wisdoms, the latter outlines the connection between Stoic philosophy and contemporary cognitive therapies. All these books combined provide a thorough and sufficient overview of Stoicism at an appropriate level and depth for the purpose of this thesis.

### 1.2 An Introduction to Stoicism

If the purpose of this thesis were to encompass the complete Stoic school of philosophy, it would be a very demanding and difficult endeavour. Not only due to the fact that many of

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<sup>26</sup> Massimo Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, (London: Rider, 2017), 20-21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 202.



the writings of the 'early' and 'middle Stoa' have not survived, but, more importantly, the philosophy of the Stoa was not necessarily a singular, coherent, unambiguous philosophy. The reason is that, similar to the Epicurean Garden or Plato's Academy, the Stoa were first and foremost a spatial designation.<sup>29</sup> It was at the Stoa Poikile ('painted porch'), a public colonnade in Athens, at which the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium (c. 334 – c. 262 BC), first began lecturing on various topics to anyone that would come and listen.<sup>30</sup> Zeno had been a follower of Crates (c. 365 – c. 285 BC), who was a Cynic and disciple of Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412 – c. 323 BC).<sup>31</sup> For the Cynics, as is true for all the other Hellenistic schools of philosophy (to which Stoicism belongs as well), the goal of life was *eudaimonia*, which can be best described as living a flourishing or happy life.<sup>32</sup> According to the Cynics, the only thing needed to live a *eudaimonic* life is virtue, therefore they renounced all material and immaterial personal attachments.<sup>33</sup> The aforementioned Cynic Diogenes of Sinope took this asceticism to the extremes: he lived in a tub on the streets of Athens, where he became notorious for his odd demeanour such as defecating and performing sexual acts in public.<sup>34</sup> Not quite unfitting is it then, that the word 'Cynic' is derived from the Greek word for dog.<sup>35</sup> It is quite plausible that Zeno did not look forward to such an ascetic life and decided to start his own school.

The philosophy of the Zenonians, who quickly became known as the Stoics, can be positioned as a sensible mix of the philosophy of the Cynics on the one hand and the Aristotelian Peripatetic school on the other.<sup>36</sup> Aristotle (384–322 BC) identified twelve virtues which, if practiced correctly and when combined with some external factors such as health, wealth, education, could lead to a *eudaimonic* life.<sup>37</sup> Hence, for Aristotle, and thus contrary to the Cynic belief, attaining a happy life is at least partly dependent on the cards one has been dealt in life. However, the Stoics opposed the Peripatetic idea that a *eudaimonic* life is to some extent reliant on external goods, but conceded, contrary to the Cynics, that some circumstances are more favourable than others. They named these

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<sup>29</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 238.

<sup>32</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 234.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 74.

<sup>35</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 74-75.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 236.

‘preferred indifferents’. These indifferents are comprised of everything that is beyond one’s own (virtuous) character, for example money, friends, a car, a good health or even freedom. These are things everyone (except maybe some Cynics) rather has than lacks. However, if the possession of these indifferent externals compromises one’s virtuous character, a Stoic would be wise enough to abstain from them. In this way, these indifferents also serve a didactic purpose: they can help make the distinction between good and bad. As Stoics are not ascetic per se, it is acceptable for them to favour being rich over being poor and being healthy over being sick or disabled. Nonetheless, such ‘externals’ should not interfere with someone’s virtues and moral integrity.<sup>38</sup> This also means that sickness and poverty do not necessarily lead to an unhappy life. Since the possibility of a *eudaimonic* life is contained within and should not be externally attributed, the Stoic philosophy is essentially very democratic: anyone can practice it regardless of their social status. Since the Stoics considered social status and a good reputation to be among these preferred indifferents, it follows that Stoics believed that every person is fundamentally equal.<sup>39</sup> It is a bit paradoxical that the Stoics held such a view during a time in which slavery was very common. Epictetus, who grew to be an important figure in Stoic history, even used to be a slave prior to his philosophical endeavours. The Stoics were, nevertheless, early cosmopolitans; they were citizens of the world who argued that every person ought to be treated as if they are one of our relatives.<sup>40</sup> Some Stoics even extended this view by including other sentient beings as well. Reportedly a number of Stoics were vegetarians.<sup>41</sup> In Stoic eyes, everybody is equal and has equal chances to live a happy life.

According to Stoic understanding, in order to reach *eudaimonia*, virtues should be cultivated. Many of the Stoic conceptions of virtue, were adopted from Socrates (c. 470 – 399 BC).<sup>42</sup> Similar to Socrates, the philosophy of the Stoa emphasized four cardinal virtues: (practical) wisdom, courage, temperance and justice.<sup>43</sup> Again, analogous to Socratic belief, wisdom is the highest possible good for the Stoics, as there is no conceivable situation in

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<sup>38</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 199.

<sup>39</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 60-61.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 69.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 99.

which it is not desirable.<sup>44</sup> Wisdom also always precedes the other virtues, as it is for instance needed to determine what is just or when it is desired to react in a courageous manner. These four cardinal virtues are therefore different manifestations of the highest—yet underlying—virtue of wisdom. For them, practicing these virtues is sufficient for a happy life.<sup>45</sup> However, Seneca tells us that it is not the joy that arises from doing virtuous deeds that leads to a happy life and people should not be mistaken to act virtuous for their own sake and pleasure.<sup>46</sup> They should act virtuous for virtue's sake because there is no guarantee that the desired external outcomes will follow, as that is beyond one's control. However, people do have control over their own actions and by focussing on them and trying to act in a virtuous manner at all times, life will become more *eudaimonic*. Most of the Stoic philosophy is therefore aimed at prescribing how people ought to act in accordance with these four virtues. For this reason, Stoic virtue ethics is essentially very pragmatic.

Much of this pragmatism is directed towards dealing with the impressions that arise from situations and occurrences. The Stoic philosophy does not teach how people should deal with their emotions and sorrows, simply—to put it in the same manner as in the preface of van Reijen's *Stoïcijjnse levenskunst*—because people do not visit the dentist to cope with a toothache, but to tackle the cause effectively.<sup>47</sup> There is a common misconception about Stoic philosophy that is very apparent in modern day references in which someone (or their reaction) is described as 'stoic'. In most of these cases, someone aims to characterize another person as insensible, apathetic or numb, typically devoid of feelings. Indeed, Stoics believed that negative emotions such as anger, sadness or anxiety stand in the way of a happy life. However, this does not mean that Stoics are insensitive. Rather, as Pigliucci puts it, "[Stoicism] is about acknowledging our emotions, reflecting on what causes them, and redirecting them for our own good".<sup>48</sup> Stoics wanted to achieve a state of what was called *apatheia*. It is a negative Stoic ideal, meaning the absence of *pathè* or passions, which are the negative emotions.<sup>49</sup> The word passion literally means 'suffering'.

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<sup>44</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 98; To be precise, the Stoics (in a similar way as some of their predecessors from other Hellenistic Schools of Philosophy) distinguished between a more practical wisdom, *phronesis*, and wisdom as the highest virtue, *sophia*.

<sup>45</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life (De Vita Beata)*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), Book XVI, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Of\\_a\\_Happy\\_Life](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Of_a_Happy_Life).

<sup>46</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book XV.

<sup>47</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijjnse levenskunst*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijjnse levenskunst*, 33.

Experiencing passions, thus, means to suffer and to undergo something unpleasant without being in control. Naturally, passions (negative emotions) are detrimental for happiness.

*Apatheia*, in turn, is necessary to reach *ataraxia*, meaning the tranquillity of mind. A *eudaimonic* life, according to the Stoics, is essentially a kind of imperturbable state of being in which someone's happiness is unaffected by external situations or occurrences and they do not experience negative emotions. Therefore, Stoic happiness is not some kind of joyous peak, but should be regarded as the absence of deep valleys.<sup>50</sup>

It is a demanding effort to achieve a *eudaimonic* life, causing an absence of negative emotions (*apatheia*) and, subsequently, attaining a calmness of mind (*ataraxia*). Central to their philosophy, Stoics therefore used the guiding principles of reason. The study of formal reasoning (propositional logic) can actually be traced back to the ancient Stoics, who made fundamental contributions to it.<sup>51</sup> Contrary to Epicurus (341 – 270 BC) and his followers who were less deterministic, the Stoics firmly believed in the principle of causality.<sup>52</sup> According to them, the universe is rationally structured through *Logos*.<sup>53</sup> Nature is eminently reasonable and therefore identical to this concept of *Logos*. This means that the universe can be understood rationally. Although slightly simplified, the Stoic God can be interpreted as another way to describe this Nature or *Logos*.<sup>54</sup> Hence, the Stoic God can be viewed as an immanent and material God that is pantheistic.<sup>55</sup> It is this Stoic conception that served as a major influence to the philosophy of seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677), who was known to be in possession of Epictetus' *Enchiridion* as well as some of Seneca's works.<sup>56</sup> According to the Stoics, reason should be employed both in making sense of every situation as well as upon deciding how to virtuously respond to them. In this sense, every happy person is autarkic due to the fact that the combination of the use of reason, self-control and acting in a virtuous manner are decisive as well as sufficient for their ultimate happiness. A happy life, the Stoics tell us, is the life lived in accordance with Nature.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 31.

<sup>51</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 22.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>56</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 117.

<sup>57</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 11.

The question arises whether every person could live in accordance with Nature, that is to say, to live a *eudaimonic* life in *apatheia* and *ataraxia*. In theory, the Stoics would agree that every person already possesses all the necessary faculties within, meaning that everybody has the cognitive ability to (learn to) reason. As explained before, happiness is autarkic; it is not dependent on external goods which are only preferred or dispreferred indifferents. However, the Stoics did not believe that their ideals were easily achieved. Only very few people actually did live according to these ideals, they were considered to be ‘Stoic Sages’. Rare examples of who the Stoics considered to be Sages are Socrates (many Stoics considered themselves to be his true followers),<sup>58</sup> Diogenes of Sinope<sup>59</sup> and Cato the Younger (95 – 46 BC)<sup>60</sup>. Many renowned Stoics did not see themselves as Stoic Sages and this is significant for Stoic philosophy. At heart, it reflects that they believed that perfection is not to be striven for, since that would mean setting the standard too high.<sup>61</sup> In addition, it also emphasizes that the Stoic philosophy is one of trial and error. People should try and bring the Stoic ideals into practice and learn from mistakes along the way. By doing this, improvements will follow. In *Of a Happy Life (De Vita Beata)* Seneca writes: “I have not arrived at perfect soundness of mind, indeed, I never shall arrive at it: I compound palliatives rather than remedies for my gout, and am satisfied if it comes at rarer interval - and does not shoot so painfully”.<sup>62</sup> During their lives, many Stoic teachers were criticized for exactly this: the fact they did not always live up to what they preached. Seneca, who had been one of Emperor Nero’s (AD 37 – 68) advisors and lived in appropriate wealth, was an advocate for material and situational detachment.<sup>63</sup> If he is to be believed, Seneca only saw his non-ascetic prosperity as being a preferred indifferent, as something he could do without. However, according to his critics, the hypocritical Seneca did not serve as an example of own philosophy. As a response to his critics, Seneca replied with an apt analogy stating that those who set out to climb steep mountains but fail to reach the top, should be respected for their ambition.<sup>64</sup> Hence, it could be concluded that the Stoic art of life is essentially an aim, an ideal or a perennial work in progress.

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<sup>58</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 42.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 41.

<sup>60</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 133-137.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 133.

<sup>62</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book XVII.

<sup>63</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 37.

<sup>64</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book XX.

The ideals and teachings of Stoicism have influenced many great thinkers throughout history. Stoic philosophy is known to have majorly influenced Christianity. There are also a lot of parallels with other religious traditions, including Buddhism and Judaism.<sup>65</sup> Besides impacting Spinoza's work, Stoicism has influenced, among others, Aquinas, Erasmus, Bacon, Descartes and Montesquieu.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Existentialism has also been influenced by the philosophy of the Stoa.<sup>67</sup> Explanations for why Stoic thought has resonated, and still resonates, with so many, can be ascribed to its compatibility with other beliefs. The Stoics attempted to rationally comprehend the universe, much like we do today. They were also very much open to criticism and did not monopolize truth.<sup>68</sup> The fact that there are multiple ways in which the Stoic God can be interpreted—whether that is a classical theistic conception or a Spinozist one is up to subjective interpretation—in all probability also contributed to the pervasive consonance with Stoic legacy.

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<sup>65</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 21, 31.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

## **Part II**

### **2.1 Stoicism Applied to Contemporary Social Media Usage**

Since Stoicism is an elaborate philosophy with many facets and the Stoic teachers were very fond of the usage of aphorisms and metaphors to deliver their practical advice, it was quite challenging to divide it in coherent thematized clusters and apply it to social media usage. Similarly, Social Networking Sites like Facebook have become extensive platforms that have transcended their original user-capabilities. Hence, I will focus on prevailing and problematic practices which typify the usage of social media. On the basis of three social media themes, I will apply Stoic philosophy and comment on the arising discrepancies. These subdivided themes are envy, judging and fear of missing out. These themes do not encompass all possible behaviours on social media but are common problematic phenomena to which a lot of the Stoic philosophy can be applied.

### **2.2 Envy**

Most social media platforms are set up in such a way that the primary aim to use the service is either to view and interact with content from others or share own content. The 'others' in this sense are other users, which can for example range from friends, strangers, institutions, companies to celebrities. Users can 'befriend' or 'follow' other users so that the content that is being shared by these other users becomes visible to them in an interface that is often being referred to as a 'timeline'. Such a timeline can best be described as the collective of different forms of content that are being shared by the people or pages that users have befriended or follow. Since they are typically made up of pictures, videos, messages or other content that has been shared by personally chosen friends and pages, these timelines are highly subjective as no two timelines will be the same. Upon visiting a social media platform (something which generally happens through the usage of mobile applications), users will thus be confronted with other people's content and interactions.

The content that is being shared on social media generally aims to portray the sharing users in a good light. In practice, this means that people tend to share pictures or videos on which they look good or which portray a skill, an activity or a possession of which they are proud. Typical examples of such shared content are holiday and concert pictures, pictures of a newly acquired outfit or car, a video recording of a covered musical piece or a

post about having graduated a degree. In this way, people mainly tend to share the favourable highlights of their lives and the characteristic features they want to be known for. Hence, social media are used as a means to constitute an identity; users can compose their own self-narrative. Naturally, there are also users that deviate from the assumed standard of positivity. However, it is not a very common practice to livestream marital disputes or to share a visit to the bathroom. The latter would probably even be in violation of several community standards.

Users who are confronted with almost exclusively positive content will sooner or later compare themselves to whatever they are exposed to. According to Social Comparison Theory, the drive for self-evaluation through comparing to others is something all humans possess.<sup>69</sup> In this case, someone would be unfairly biased if they took the disproportionately positive social media standard as a means to reflect on their own life. Since social media show a distorted version of reality, the comparisons made on these platforms can have a detrimental effect on the self-esteem of users. For instance, a study about the effects of Facebook usage on women's mood and body image shows that women report more negatively after spending time on the platform.<sup>70</sup> Although it is part of human nature to compare to others, when users (regardless of their gender) do so on social media they are bound to encounter content that portray a limited, yet predominantly positive, picture of reality. Therefore, what follows will be a Stoic consultation focused on the envy that can arise from comparing with other people's constructed 'best selves' on social media.

Had social media existed during ancient times in which Stoicism flourished and had someone sought Stoic help for their envious thoughts which resulted from their social media usage, a Stoic teacher would have offered advice on several counts. In all probability, the Stoic teacher would first have expressed assent for the problem, for Epictetus teaches us that it is not as fun to hear about other people's experiences and adventures as it is to tell them yourself.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Seneca knew about the prevalence of envy and stated that

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<sup>69</sup> Festinger, L., "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations*, 7(2), (1954): 117-140.

<sup>70</sup> Fardouly, J. et al., "Social Comparisons on Social Media: The Impact of Facebook on Young Women's Body Image Concerns and Mood," *Body Image*, 13, 38-45; This study focusses on women only. By citing this particular article, I do not want to suggest that men are less susceptible to these workings of social media, there just has been fewer research about the effects of social media usage on male body image.

<sup>71</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §33.



the number of someone's admirers is equal to the number of people who envy them.<sup>72</sup> The Stoic teacher would proceed along the lines of explaining that people who pridefully brag with their possessions on social media are subject to fallacious thinking. For instance, those who share a picture of their new car accompanied by a message stating "Look at my beautiful new ride!" are in fact not proud of anything that is part of themselves, they are proud of a property that belongs to the car.<sup>73</sup> In this way, in the unfortunate event the car is stolen or damaged, it will undoubtedly lead to a reduced sense of happiness since the object that caused it no longer does so. Since objects are only 'preferred indifferents', making happiness dependent on external objects such as cars is never a good idea according to a Stoic.<sup>74</sup> After all, virtue does not stem from wealth or poverty as those are both morally neutral.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, Epictetus advises not to "be prideful with any excellence that is not your own".<sup>76</sup> Solely the reactions to things belong to people themselves and only when people react conform Nature, that is to say to employ reason correctly, they can be proud of that.<sup>77</sup>

Moving from the Stoic critique of the sharing user's side to the interpreting receiver's share in this situation, a Stoic counsellor would conclude that it is misleading to think that things necessarily are how they appear to be.<sup>78</sup> Epictetus and Seneca both voiced this advice. The latter went as far as to add that things can be "outwardly brilliant, but within are miseries to those who possess them".<sup>79</sup> I will deal more elaborately with what the Stoics had to say about judgements later. In the meantime, someone who is envious of other people's possessions or popularity on social media should realize a couple of things, according to the Stoics. First of all, Epictetus rightfully pointed out that any reasoning that states that just because another person is richer than someone else, they are better than them, is inherently false.<sup>80</sup> Such a comparison shows a category mistake since, at least for a Stoic, property can never be compared to the virtuousness of a person's character. Moreover, when people experience envy towards someone else's popularity or amount of

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<sup>72</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book II.

<sup>73</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §6.

<sup>74</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book XVIII.

<sup>76</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §6.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>78</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §19.

<sup>79</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book II.

<sup>80</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §44.

'likes' on social media, they should realize that the other person very well might have paid the price in order to receive such regard. In an analogy, Epictetus compares this to lettuce. If a person pays fifty cents for lettuce whereas another is unwilling to do so, the paying person has not gained an advantage over the unwilling person as the latter still has their fifty cents.<sup>81</sup> The same can be said of likes on social media, the person who receives many is likely to have paid the price for them. This could, for instance, be in the form of similar expressions of admiration and praise. Meanwhile, someone who does not receive many likes can refrain from paying such dues. For Epictetus, it is a personal choice whether or not to want anything as long as it does not interfere with someone's rational and virtuous character and they are willing to pay the price.<sup>82</sup>

However, according to Stoic thought, nothing is to be desired that is beyond a person's control. This strikes at the heart of what is called the Stoic dichotomy of control. It particularly serves a central role in Epictetus' philosophy, who even claimed that all that Stoicism amounts to is the study of this dichotomy.<sup>83</sup> The first sentences of his *Enchiridion* explain it:

"Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions."<sup>84</sup>

In the few passages that follow this initial bifurcation, Epictetus explains how the things beyond a person's control will render them slavish and if they aim to live a happy life, they should not be mistaken to treat something that is beyond their control as if it were their own.<sup>85</sup> The Stoics knew all too well that it is not only futile but also harmful to worry over things that cannot be controlled. Therefore, Stoics would advise to focus on the things which are within control and to wish things will happen the way they happen.<sup>86</sup> The Stoics

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<sup>81</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §25.

<sup>82</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>83</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 10.

<sup>84</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §1.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. §1.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. §8.

used many analogies to convey the ideas surrounding this dichotomy. One of the most luminous is attributed to Chrysippus and is discussed by Pigliucci in *How to be a Stoic*:

“Imagine a dog who is leashed to a cart. The cart begins to move forward, in whatever direction the driver, but certainly not the dog, chooses. Now, the leash is long enough that the dog has two options: either he can gingerly follow the general direction of the cart, over which he has no control, and thereby enjoy the ride and even have time to explore his surroundings and attend some of his own business, or he can stubbornly resist the cart with all his might and end up being dragged, kicking and screaming, for the rest of the trip, accumulating much pain and frustration and wasting his time in a futile and decidedly unpleasant effort. We humans are, of course, the dog: the universe keeps churning according to God’s will (if you have religious inclinations) or cosmic cause and effect (if your taste is more secular). But you do have some room to maneuver, while you are alive and well, and you can choose to enjoy the ride, even as you remain aware of the constraints you have and know that whatever you wish to accomplish always comes with a big caveat: Fate (the cart drive, God, the universe) permitting. This is what it means to do whatever you do while ‘keeping in line with nature’.”<sup>87</sup>

In the opening words of the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus includes reputation among the things outside of control. According to the Stoics, it is unwise to envy a good reputation and to go to great lengths to try to attain it for the simple reason that it cannot be determined in what regard you are being held. Other people’s opinions cannot be controlled and to desire differently would inevitably lead to frustration. An objection would be that people can at least influence their perceived reputation by acting in a favourable manner. Although it is indeed true that reputation can be influenced to some extent by behaving in a certain way, this argument only confirms the dichotomy even more by stressing the importance of focussing on own behaviour as that is something which is contained within someone’s control. In addition, a good reputation is a preferred indifferent at best for a Stoic. Allowing happiness to be dependent on something as volatile as reputation, is not something a wise Stoic would permit. Besides, the Stoics knew that a good reputation in the sense of fame also has its downsides. Seneca compared it to turning oneself into a mark for the arrows of

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<sup>87</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 212-213.

enemies and showing others where you can be wounded.<sup>88</sup> Like all other things that are outside of control, reputation is to be treated with equanimity, on social media as well as in real life.

Despite the fact that the Stoics believed that a good reputation should not be treated as if it were an end in itself, they did not think reputations were completely useless. Role models play an important part in Stoic philosophy as well as in other ancient schools of philosophy. In ancient Greece, it was a common practice to openly discuss and contemplate on the ideal role model (Sage) and their virtues.<sup>89</sup> Essentially, this is a didactic practice. By imagining how role models or a Sage would have responded in a particular situation, people can learn to become virtuous. This advice is also voiced by Epictetus, who instructed to ask oneself what Zeno or Socrates would have done if they had been in the same situation.<sup>90</sup> When applying this ancient advice to modern day life, a few things should be taken into account. Who the Stoics considered to be a role models or Sages are a little different from 'contemporary role models'. As Pigliucci points out, nowadays people often tend to glorify celebrities like actors, musicians, athletes or social media stars based on something else than their moral character.<sup>91</sup> Being good at something is different from being good. Seneca also knew this difference and stated that many have the "habit of thinking that those things are best which are most generally received as such, of taking many counterfeits for truly good things, and of living not by reason but by imitation of others".<sup>92</sup> Seneca believed that becoming part of the majority is to be avoided since he was convinced that "the more people do a thing the worse it is likely to be".<sup>93</sup> According to him, it is harmful to follow other people without passing a critical judgment.<sup>94</sup>

Therefore, a modern Stoic social media advice would be not to follow or befriend the most popular, most 'liked' or best acclaimed people, but to follow those people who act virtuously. In addition, people should not be envious of others through comparing possessions or reputation as happiness does not stem from things which are beyond their

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<sup>88</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book II.

<sup>89</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 137.

<sup>90</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §33.

<sup>91</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 132.

<sup>92</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book I.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* Book II.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* Book I.

control. If users want to compare themselves on social media, they should take the virtuous behaviour of true role models as an example.

### **2.3 Judging**

Social media are set up in such a way that they make people judge and feel. The reason for this can be found in their business models. In order to be used by as many people as possible, these social media platforms can be used freely; anyone can sign-up for an account. Nevertheless, social media have found different ways to generate revenue, namely through showing their users advertisements. Hence, a platform like Facebook is essentially a concealed advertising company. These platforms collect great amounts of data about their users, so that it becomes easier for advertisers to target specific groups of people. It follows that the longer users stay on these platforms, the more ads they will be shown which in turn leads to more revenue. Thus, social media platforms benefit from longer usage. One way to achieve this, is by showing the users precisely what they want to see through the usage of smart algorithms. These algorithms predict, based on the previous behaviour of users, what content is most relevant for them (in other words, which content will make them interact the most). This content is then prioritized by placing it higher on their personal timeline. Although cloaked in marketing jargon, Facebook has made no secret about how their platform works. They aim to “prioritize posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions between people”.<sup>95</sup> In this way, they hope to stimulate discussions so that their users will interact more, with each other as well as with the content itself.<sup>96</sup> Facebook, and other social media alike, know that in order to make users spend time on their platform, they need to make people engage with the content on it. On Facebook it has become quite obvious on how they try to achieve this engagement. It becomes apparent through the recent developments of the ‘like-button’. Whereas in the past users could only ‘like’ other content by pressing the like-button, this button has evolved into something that is more extensive. Besides the classic ‘thumbs up’-like option, user can now also choose to react five other emoticon-styled responses, including a heart-shape for love, a crying face for sad and an enraged face for angry. From this, it is evident Facebook wants to evoke an emotional

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<sup>95</sup> “Bringing People Closer Together,” Facebook, accessed May 5, 2018, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/01/news-feed-fyi-bringing-people-closer-together/>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibidem.

response in their users in an effort to keep their attention and make them spend more time on the platform. However, in a recent study about the amount of time people can focus on a task without being distracted, it was found that in the past 15 years the human attention span declined from 15 to merely 8 seconds.<sup>97</sup> In addition, these researchers concluded that those who had the most intensive digital lifestyles also struggled most with keeping their attention.<sup>98</sup> Taking these findings, it seems paradoxical that on the one hand Facebook benefits from longer usage times but on the other hand it is the usage of these digital technologies that distracts us. As Facebook has something to gain from keeping the attention on the platform, it seems as if they try to accomplish this by bombarding users with stimuli that ask to be judged and which, consequently, evoke an emotional experience on the side of the user. In this way, a new emotion seems to be only a thumb scroll away on social media.

Since negative emotions tend to deter people from living a happy life, the Stoics had a lot to say about emotions in general. As mentioned before, it is a misconception that the Stoics pleaded for a complete absence of emotions. Their goal was only to replace all negative emotions and desires (which would fall under the same heading for a Stoic) for more rational counterparts which need to be cultivated.<sup>99</sup> It can be said that the Stoics believed there were three good emotions: joy, caution and preference.<sup>100</sup> Such a transformation, from negative to positive dispositions of mind, would be to replace hedonic pleasures for a more rational enjoyment or to not be fearful but instead to act cautiously.<sup>101</sup> A good first step towards the cultivation of more rational emotions and away from suffering from the experience of negative emotions, is to realise something that Epictetus taught his students almost two millennia ago, namely that people “are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things”.<sup>102</sup> It is also this notion that has served as an indispensable foundation for Ellis’ development of his Rational Emotive Therapy.<sup>103</sup> The core of the idea is that although many things happen in the world, these things are not the cause of negative emotions, it is the judgements that people tend to

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<sup>97</sup> Hans Schnitzler, *Kleine filosofie van de digitale onthouding* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2017), 102.

<sup>98</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>99</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 86-88.

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>102</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §5.

<sup>103</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 71.

superimpose on the things that happen that makes them suffer from it. Put differently, people suffer because of their own views and opinions concerning things, not because of the things themselves.

For a Stoic, negative emotions are the result of the cognitive dissonance that arises when a normative judgment (which is believed to be true) clashes with the factuality of reality.<sup>104</sup> An example that can illustrate this Stoic cognitive conception of emotions is the theft of a beautiful race bike. A factual description of such a situation from the perspective of the bike's owner would be as follows: 'someone stole my race bike'. However, it is only the subsequent normative judgement which is often formed by the owner—something along the lines of “this should not have happened (especially not to me, since I am a good person)” —that causes the owner to experience negative emotions. In this way, the mind is complicit in that experience. Following the dichotomy of control, just as it is beyond someone's power to decide what other people steal or not, one is also unable to change the past. Knowing that it is a fact of life that things sometimes get stolen, Stoics would rationally accept the fact that it was their time to return their bike to the will of fate.<sup>105</sup> However, this should not be seen as a fatalistic tendency of the Stoics.<sup>106</sup> Based on their knowledge of what is within their power, a Stoic who wants to prevent a repetition of facts would decide to buy a better lock or, in case the Stoic lives in the Netherlands, consider to buy a less beautiful race bike.

Since judgement thus always precedes emotion, judging correctly is of vast importance to a Stoic. According to Seneca, a happy life is even “founded upon a true and trustworthy discernment”.<sup>107</sup> As previously discussed, Seneca was not very fond of herd-like behaviour and urged people to come to their own judgements if they do not want to undergo the same mistakes as others.<sup>108</sup> Judging, the Stoics advise, should happen in a neutral manner. To avoid any judgemental errors, people should refrain from any hasty conclusions. Epictetus clarifies this using the example of seeing another person drink a lot of wine. According to Epictetus (and his fellow Stoics), in this case the observer should not assent to the appearance that the person has a drinking problem or that they do ill as the

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<sup>104</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 74.

<sup>105</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §11.

<sup>106</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 174.

<sup>107</sup> Seneca, *Of a Happy Life*, Book V.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. Book I.

motivations of the person involved are unknown.<sup>109</sup> The best Stoic advice therefore is to look at things matter-of-factly and refrain from critical and normative judgements.<sup>110</sup> The same advice applies in regard to appearances which seem saddening or infuriating at first glance. According to Epictetus, people should cultivate the habit of reminding themselves during times of distress that a painful appearance is still only an appearance, in order to remain neutral towards it.<sup>111</sup>

An objection to the view that negative emotions are solely the result of fallacious judging could be to point out that some appearances, even when judged correctly, intend to be hurtful. Malicious behaviour such as insults or bullying are examples of this. Naturally, these phenomena are not limited to the offline world and are being called ‘cyberbullying’ when they take place in an online environment. Studies investigating the prevalence rates of cyberbullying on social media platforms report percentages ranging from 10% to 40% of users that have experienced it.<sup>112</sup> Cyberbullying on social media can have far-reaching effects on the mental health of victims. Suicide related-behaviour is increasingly associated with cyberbullying on social media.<sup>113</sup> Stoic wisdom could perhaps be of use to the victims of online viciousness. Although it is a correct judgement that some appearances aim to be hurtful, Stoics would never conclude that they should therefore assent to feel justified in the negative emotions that arise from it. According to Epictetus, people should “[r]emember, that not he who gives ill language or a blow insults, but the principle which represents these things as insulting”.<sup>114</sup> Only when people decide to believe the insult to be true or develop the idea that the person voicing it should not have done that, can the insult lead to a negative experience. As discussed in regard to reputation, Stoics would understand that the views of other people are beyond their control and would adopt an accepting attitude towards them. After all, a Stoic knows that such malicious behaviour is far from virtuous and originates from a lack of knowledge. They called a lack of knowledge *amatheia* and it can be

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<sup>109</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §45.

<sup>110</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 229.

<sup>111</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §1.

<sup>112</sup> Elizabeth Whittaker and Robin M. Kowalski, “Cyberbullying Via Social Media,” *Journal of School Violence*, 14:1, 2015: 12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2014.949377>.

<sup>113</sup> David D. Luxton, Jennifer D. June, and Jonathan M. Fairall, “Social Media and Suicide: A Public Health Perspective,” *American Journal of Public Health* 102, (2012): S195-S200, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1017604812?accountid=13598>.

<sup>114</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §20.



seen as the opposite of *sophia*, which in turn means wisdom; the highest of virtues.<sup>115</sup> Knowing that people who voice insults do most harm to themselves by not acting virtuously, Epictetus concluded that such people are to be pitied.<sup>116</sup> A consequence of this realisation is an increased likeliness of being compassionate rather than angry towards a perpetrator.<sup>117</sup> The Stoic advice in this situation would be to respond to insults only with humour, if one is to respond at all.<sup>118</sup> When someone spoke ill of Epictetus, he would respond: “He does not know my other faults, else he would not have mentioned only these”.<sup>119</sup>

Social media platforms which on the one hand allow for cyberbullying and on the other hand feed their users appearances and consequently nudge them towards the formation of judgments and corresponding emotions, do not seem to be the right place for a Stoic. However, a Stoic does not shun a test of character, knowing that “true benefit and harm lie not in his external fortune, but within his own mind”.<sup>120</sup>

## 2.4 Fear of Missing Out

Social media seem to disrupt the users’ relationship with their present, including its immediate spatial environment. This claim can best be illustrated by discussing the social media phenomenon that has been coined the ‘fear of missing out’ (FoMO) in combination with Stoic conceptions regarding time and place.

Fear of missing out can be “[d]efined as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, FoMO is characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing”.<sup>121</sup> In other words, the term is used to describe the social anxiety that arises from the fact that someone can only be in one place at the time and therefore fears to regret their decision as to where they have chosen to spend their time. In this way, there is an emphasis on the scarcity of time, since people want to have as much fulfilling experiences as possible but can only have so many. The awareness of this fact seems to put pressure on people’s choice of presence, as

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<sup>115</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 115.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 117-121.

<sup>117</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 223.

<sup>119</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §33.

<sup>120</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 88.

<sup>121</sup> Andrew K. Przybylski et al., “Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, 4 (2013): 1841, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.014>.

the present must be exploited to the fullest. People feel like they have to do as much as they possibly can. The ultimate outcomes of this pressure are stress and burnouts. CBT-pioneer Ellis already called this phenomenon ‘musterbation’, it is a self-incurred urge to place unrealistic demands oneself.<sup>122</sup> Social media seem to play an aggravating role in this.

The content that is being shared on social media for the most part consists of recorded experiences. In the past, users had to visit social networking sites on a computer. Hence, it took a considerable amount of time between when an experience was recorded and when it was uploaded to one of these platforms. Years and many technological advances later, there is a lot more immediacy in the sharing habits of users. Smartphones and apps grant unlimited access to social media and it has become customary to share current activities immediately through posting pictures or short video clips. Some of this uploaded content is only meant to stay visible for a limited amount of time, in what is often being referred to as a user’s ‘story’. This temporary visibility serves as an extra motivation to regularly check on other people’s posted content, before it is too late. Some social media platforms have even incorporated the possibility of live streaming, allowing users to share a real-time audiovisual recording of their present experiences. Social media users are thus constantly being confronted with other people’s (near-)present experiences; other people’s lived stories. Knowing that people fear to miss out on events, happenings and interactions, it seems that the perception and valuation of their own present time and surroundings are affected by this interconnectedness of social media.

A proper sense of time and place is very important in Stoic philosophy. The Stoics were eminently aware of the certainty of death and the impermanence of things.<sup>123</sup> Hence, themes revolving around time such as loss, mortality and suicide play a recurring role in Stoic literature. Time also serves a central role in one of Seneca’s works, *On the Shortness of Life (De Brevitate Vitae)*. In this work, Seneca lends his advice to Paulinus, a busy man and close relative of his wife.<sup>124</sup> Seneca argues that life’s fleeting ephemeralness does not stem from the fact that life is short, “but that we waste much of it”.<sup>125</sup> This is disturbing since, in his view, time is “the most precious thing in the world”.<sup>126</sup> Too often, Seneca explains,

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<sup>122</sup> Reijen, *Stoïcijnse levenskunst*, 113.

<sup>123</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 162-163.

<sup>124</sup> Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life (De Brevitate Vitae)*, trans. John W. Basore (London: William Heinemann, 1932), *Passim*, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On\\_the\\_shortness\\_of\\_life](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_shortness_of_life).

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* Book I.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* Book VIII.

people allow others to take possession of their time, inattentive of the fact there is no way to regain it.<sup>127</sup> “No one is to be found who is willing to distribute his money, yet among how many does each one of us distribute his life!”, he proclaims.<sup>128</sup> Besides other people, busy schedules also make people oblivious to their valuable time, in a similar way as how the act of reading shortens the journey of a traveller.<sup>129</sup> Too many occupations are distractive, ultimately causing life to rush by. The person whose “interests are divided, takes in nothing very deeply, but rejects everything that is, as it were, crammed into it”.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, Seneca advises Paulinus to be cautious with regard to how he chooses to spend his life. If not, Seneca warns, he will find himself questioning at the end of his life where all of his time has gone.<sup>131</sup>

Seneca’s timeless advice reflects the desired Stoic attitude that is to be adopted in the *hic et nunc*, the *here and now*. This aspired attitude is described by the concept of *prosoche*, which means to have a relentless focus on oneself.<sup>132</sup> Knowing that happiness emerges from an autarkic attitude, Stoics focus on their own life, and more specifically on their own experience of the present time. By focussing on the present moment, there is neither room for regret nor expectations in the life of a Stoic. The person who is regretful lives in the past and refuses to accept the fact that past events are beyond their control. Therefore, the Stoic knows that regret is only a waste of energy.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, someone who is full of expectations is negligent towards the present and the uncertainty of the future. Anxiety, which is essentially no more than having negative expectations about the future, is therefore never grounded in the present. In addition to focussing on the present moment, a Stoic would also know, as Epictetus pointed out, that people are most anxious about things that cannot be controlled and which should therefore be treated with equanimity.<sup>134</sup> As the Stoic philosopher Hecato (c. 100 BC) emblematically voiced: “Cease to hope and you will cease to fear”.<sup>135</sup> Since fear of missing out is nothing else than being anxious to regret the choice of present, it is diametrically opposed to the Stoic way of relating to the present. Two

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<sup>127</sup> Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*, Book III.

<sup>128</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. Book IX.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. Book VII.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Book IX.

<sup>132</sup> Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 153.

<sup>133</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 38.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 128.

<sup>135</sup> as cited in Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 153.

popular idiomatic expressions can best be used to illustrate the right way for a Stoic to deal with the past and future, they are: “what is done is done” and “do not cross that bridge till you come to it”. Stoics would adopt this attitude, while always focusing on their own present time.

Moreover, there is another way in which social media tend to divert from the concept of *prosoche*, the attention to oneself and present actions. This way does not have to do with the feelings, judgements or expectations that arise from social media usage, but it is concerned with how people use social media that tends to obstruct people’s immediate relationship with the spatial world. Social media usage does not start when users open their apps or login on their computers, there is a prevailing social media logic through which people seem to make sense of their world. This becomes clear when visiting a concert or a restaurant. It is almost impossible to not notice the many people who—for social media purposes—make endless video recordings at concerts or who necessarily have to take a picture of their food prior to consumption. In this way, social media become exactly what the name ascribes: it is a medium through which we perceive the world. As argued before, there is a lot more immediacy when it comes to our sharing habits. However, some of the immediacy of the present is lost at the same time. By almost obsessively recording the present in order to share it on social media, the present is reduced to a sort of ‘future past’; a memory for the future. People who tend to do this do not take the present for what it is but see it for what it could be on social media. They see potential ‘likes’ or attention. Such social media logic permeates the experience of the present in a way that the objects and places in someone’s immediate spatial environment become ‘instagrammable’.<sup>136</sup>

Yet, someone does not share an ‘instagrammable’ moment for themselves to see it, it is shared for others to see it. This is the other side of the same coin. On the one hand, social media users reduce their own present experiences to ‘stories’ for others to view and, on the other hand, social media are all about watching other people’s experiences. The time spent on social media is mostly time spent watching other people’s experiences. This is done on a large scale; statistics show that the average social media use has surpassed two hours

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<sup>136</sup> e.g.: Stephanie Takyi, “The 10 most instagrammable spots in Amsterdam,” *METRO*, 22 May, 2018. <https://metro.co.uk/2018/05/22/the-10-most-instagrammable-spots-in-amsterdam-7547370/>.

per day.<sup>137</sup> Many people tend to grab their smartphones to check social media at every possible occasion. This happens everywhere; at bus stops, in trains, in class, and even while driving. Therefore, social media usage alternates between the degradation of own experiences to ‘stories for others’ and spending a lot of time watching other people’s lives. However, all this time people’s attention is directed to others instead of being directed towards their own *hic et nunc*, as Stoics would have it. This becomes particularly evident in one of Snapchat’s most recent additions, the ‘Snap Map’.<sup>138</sup> Upon opening this feature, users can visit any place in the world and view the stories other users have shared of that particular location. This ‘Snap Map’ can serve as a paradigmatic characterization of the situatedness of social media users. Social media users do not focus on themselves in the *here and now*, but rather, they are other-directed in the ‘everywhere and non-now’. Such a focus is detrimental to the perception and relation social media users have with their own immediate surroundings as well as their situatedness in the present. These conclusions correspond with observations of people who decide to refrain from smartphones and social media usage for a while. Dutch philosopher Hans Schnitzler, who wrote a book on digital abstinence, subjected his students to a so called ‘digital detox’. Eventually, they observed how they seemed to regain control over their lives and how the world became more certain in a way.<sup>139</sup>

All things considered, Stoics would not allow their focus to stray from the present moment and place. They would not let a social media filter devalue their experience of and situatedness in the present by reducing the experiences in the *hic et nunc* to ‘stories for others’ or mere ‘likes’. Most of all, Stoics would not waste their time by constantly pointing their focus outwards, instead they would adopt the self-focusing attitude of *prosoche*.

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<sup>137</sup> “Daily time spent on social networking by internet users worldwide from 2012 to 2017 (in minutes),” Statista, last modified May 25, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/433871/daily-social-media-usage-worldwide/> .

<sup>138</sup> <https://map.snapchat.com/>.

<sup>139</sup> Schnitzler, *Kleine filosofie van de digitale onthouding*, 99-100.

## Part III

### 3.1 Conclusions and Reflections

This thesis started with some worrying signals about the mental health of particularly younger generations. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety seem to be more commonplace in this age of pervasive digital connectedness. More than once, these issues are at least to some extent attributed to social media usage. The people who suffer from such conditions are often being treated with cognitive behavioural therapies and these methods have proven to be very successful in combatting said maladies. Since the developers of the early CBT's have been very explicit about the Stoic philosophical underpinnings of their methods, the question arose whether there exists something fundamentally incompatible between contemporary social media usage and ancient Stoic philosophy.

On the basis of three broad, yet prevailing social media themes, Stoics wisdoms were contrasted with typical social media behaviour. It appears that the desired Stoic way of acting (and living in general) is often diametrically opposed to frequent behaviour on social media. Firstly, social media platforms have grown to be a means to compare with other people. However, since the content on these platforms only show a disproportionately positive version of reality, usage often results in envy towards other people. Not only is comparing futile unless it is about virtuous behaviour, in Stoic philosophy there is also no room for irrational desires of things beyond one's control which initially instigate envy. Secondly, social media, and particularly Facebook, nudge their users towards the formation of (normative) judgements as well as emotions. While benefiting from it, social media aim at keeping the attention of their users by subjecting them to stimuli and subsequently demand emotionally loaded judgements. As an autarkic philosophy which is directed towards living a happy life undisturbed by negative emotions and external occurrences, Stoicism is very much at odds with this aspect of social media. Lastly, the other-directed attitude of social media users is completely opposed to the desired Stoic focus on one's own present. Social media usage leads to a permeating social media logic that deteriorates the valuation and experience of one's own present. Stoics would not reduce their present to a story for others to see nor would they waste time watching other people's experiences. After examining these three themes, it seems as if social media are not the right environment for a Stoic.

Beside the incompatibilities between Stoicism and social media surrounding these three specific topics, there is a more general way that has to do with the nature of social media platforms that make them practically unsuitable for a Stoic. As argued before, many of the companies behind these social media platforms generate revenue by selling advertisements, which essentially makes them marketing companies. There exists something irreconcilable between marketing and Stoic thought. Nowadays, marketing is increasingly about creating desires by showing potential customers what kind of person they could be, were they to buy the product or service in question. In this way, marketing plays into the fallacious belief that happiness will arise from acquiring the newest products (e.g. the most fashionable or technologically advanced goods). This has been called the 'hedonic treadmill', since pursuing material goods will not lead to enduring happiness as there will always be new products or things one lacks.<sup>140</sup> However, in the consumer society where this insatiable belief prevails, happiness and success become comparable. If happiness stems from material goods and success is based on salary-size, people will look outward to confirm whether or not they are happy. Social media are a great tool to do this. However, this is completely opposed to the core values of Stoicism. Happiness, according to the Stoics, is about being free from disturbing desires and emotions. It is not found in material goods, these are at most 'preferred indifferents'. As it arises from acting in a virtuous manner while always adopting a rational attitude with respect to experiences, the autarkic Stoic happiness is incommensurable at heart. Moreover, happiness, for a Stoic, is not at all future-oriented in a pursuing manner like marketing would make believe. Stoicism is not about becoming happy once material goods have been acquired or success has been attained, it is about being happy while focussing on the present and accepting the world as it is. It is particularly this last notion about the focus on and acceptance of being, instead of becoming, that could prove to be a very helpful Stoic wisdom during times in which mental health issues plague our interconnected existence.

### **3.2 A Stoic Approach to Social Media**

Regardless of the fact that social media seem to thwart the Stoic art of living in many ways, it would nevertheless be very un-Stoic to conclude that it is impossible for a Stoic to use

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<sup>140</sup> Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 77.

social media. As mentioned before, Stoicism is a very open philosophy since “truth lies open for all”, as Seneca wisely expressed.<sup>141</sup> Hence, it is not a philosophy that is characterized by necessary asceticism. After all, “[t]here’s nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so”, as Shakespeare Stoically articulated in *Hamlet*.<sup>142</sup> Therefore, social media usage can be viewed as belonging to the preferred indifferents, meaning that it is something that could be done as long as it does not interfere with bringing the Stoic ideals into practice. Knowing that Stoics would not shy away from a challenge nor from an opportunity to practice their ideals, what follows is a general outlining summary of the principles a Stoic would certainly not violate.

In so far as the virtual world is a reflection of the offline world, it follows that the ancient Stoic wisdoms should be applied during the usage of social media technologies. Hence, Stoics would refrain from many types of typical social media behaviour. They would refrain from bragging with anything other than their own virtuous behaviour. Minding the dichotomy of control, they would not have irrational desires nor would they be envious of others. Instead of following (social media) celebrities, they would only follow or befriend those people who add value to their lives and serve as virtuous role models. They would not hesitate to ‘unfriend’ people, knowing that friends are mere preferred indifferents. In addition, Stoics would refrain from forming critical and normative judgments, nor would they be seduced into allowing negative emotions to emerge (neither from stimuli nor from cyberbullying). Moreover, Stoics would not use social media solely to pass time or to escape reality, but only as means to a justifiable end. Instead of scrolling for the sake of scrolling, Stoics would use social media much more purposefully, for instance to communicate with friends from abroad. While always wishing to be where they already are, Stoics would not let their social media usage devalue their own present or condone any anxiety or regret. It will nevertheless be hard for Stoics on social media to remain focussed on themselves. However, as Stoicism does not necessarily discourage listening to other people’s stories ‘in real life’, modern Stoics would find a way in which the right focus is kept while doing this on social media. Lastly, Stoics would not allow social media logic to permeate every aspect of their lives in such a way that it becomes a filter through which they perceive the world. For instance, they would not allow social media to play a motivating role as to whether or not to

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<sup>141</sup> as cited in Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic*, 12.

<sup>142</sup> as cited in Robertson, *Philosophy of CBT*, 5.



do certain things (e.g. taking pictures especially for social media or attending an event because the attendance of it will lead to a certain level of prestige). Most importantly, Stoics would know when something interferes with the Stoic path to a *eudaimonic* life and will therefore abstain from social media usage in case they suffer from it.

### 3.3 Concluding Remarks

To conclude this thesis, a couple remarks will briefly be discussed.

One of this thesis' limitations concerns the scope of it. As argued in the introduction to Stoicism, its philosophical school is very extensive. The Stoics have written about a great number of topics and not all of them were relevant for the purpose of this thesis. However, since it is such a comprehensive school, there will most certainly be topics that could have been applied to social media usage but remain undiscussed.

A similar remark could be made of social media platforms. As there are many platforms that all include countless features, there will be usage aspects which are very much aligned with the core ideals of Stoicism. Likewise, there will be some aspects that could heavily taint the desired Stoic art of living. However, as the usage aspects contained in this thesis are not exclusive, not all possible aspects were discussed in this thesis.

Another limitation of this study is a precautionary statement at the same time. In this thesis as well as in the Stoic works, the origins of mental health conditions are being placed with the one who suffers from them. In this way, it seems as if both the fault as well as the responsibility lies with the sufferer. The last thing depressed people need, is being told that it is their fault they feel like this. Once more, Epictetus offers a helpful Stoic instruction regarding this matter:

“An uneducated person will lay the fault of his own bad condition upon others. Someone just starting instruction will lay the fault on himself. Some who is perfectly instructed will place blame neither on others nor on himself.”<sup>143</sup>

Wise people do not blame themselves, as they know they have done the best they could, given the circumstances. Important to note, however, is that there exist pathological

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<sup>143</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §5.

conditions and disorders that can lead to depression and anxiety. In these cases, even the most rational Stoic attitude will not suffice and professional help should most certainly be sought.

It remains to be seen if the nature of social media will change. However, it would be a positive development, for Stoic and other users alike, to gain more autonomy with regard to the designs and arrangements of these platforms. When users are able to tailor these services to their own personal likings, they can rearrange social media to fit and support their happy lives.



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