DONNA FREITAS

THE HAPPINESS EFFECT

How Social Media is Driving a Generation
to Appear Perfect at Any Cost

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FOREWORD BY CHRISTIAN SMITH

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This book is dedicated to Katie, Andleeb, Ozzie, Cristianna, and Dion, the extraordinary students in my Hofstra memoir seminar. You struggled together to think about the biggest and most important of life's questions with openness and honesty, and allowed me to be present for this. You made me laugh and reflect and wonder at my luck in having you all in class. I am so proud of everything that you've become.

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FOREWORD

Margaret has to avoid Facebook because seeing how happy everyone else appears online makes her unhappy by comparison. Rob gets a call from a friend asking him to "Like" his new Facebook photo to save him from the possibility of it not being liked enough. Michael felt lonely because he spent most of high school trying to impress people on social media rather than spending time with his friends. These are just a few of the people you will meet in this book. And it is tempting to ask: What's the matter with kids today?

Everybody knows that the digital communications revolution—the Internet, social media, smartphones, online dating, and more—is transforming our society. But nobody really knows yet how these technological innovations are changing us and our ways of life—possibly including our very sense of self—and just how far it will go. We have lived long enough with this revolution by now to know that it *is* truly revolutionary, not a superficial phase. But we have not lived with it long enough to know what it really means for us in the long run.

Everywhere I travel to speak about the lives of youth, I am asked how the Internet, and social media, and smartphones are changing young people's lives—usually, it is suspected, for the worse. Is it making them less interested in real, face-to-face relationships? Is it turning them into self-centered egomaniacs? Is it causing them to disconnect from social institutions, like sports teams and churches? Is it distorting their sense of morality? As a sociologist, ever attentive to data, I have always had to answer that I don't really know, because there wasn't enough good research available. I think the changes *are* real and big, I would say, but beyond that I could only speculate. My answers were always incomplete and disappointing.

You now have in your hands a landmark book that answers these questions. Donna Freitas's *The Happiness Effect* provides the first really serious and reliable answers to these kinds of questions that parents ask every day. As a researcher, I am very excited about it, even as I find it troubling as a parent. Unlike a lot of writing in this area, this book is neither speculation nor sensationalism. It is serious, focused on a hugely important issue, and based on rock-solid empirical evidence. Freitas elegantly interprets the data—mostly by allowing young people to speak for themselves—in clear and accessible prose that is rare among academic writers. It deserves and needs to be widely read.

One of the most important findings in this book, to my mind, is the schizophrenic effect social media has on people's sense of self. Social media produces a world in which the problems and blemishes of real life are hidden behind virtual presentations of self that struggle, often obsessively, to be "Liked." One must always appear attractive, happy, and clever. And, as Freitas deftly shows, even while many users grasp the dehumanizing forces at work here, they find it difficult to keep themselves from playing into this virtual world's insidious grasp on human insecurities and fears. The damage is perpetrated mostly by the same people who suffer them. It is troubling to anyone who wishes to see young people growing up to be authentically secure, happy, realistic, and genuinely caring about the real needs of other people.

The pages that follow skillfully reveal the sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant ways that social media twist and distort young people's senses of self. I have seen hints of this in my own research, but this book nails it with force and insight. When I interviewed young people, smartphones and Facebook continually interrupted, metaphorically and sometimes literally. I knew social media was an essential topic. This book, which brings us inside the intimate thoughts and feelings of youth struggling to develop authentic senses of themselves, yet also wrestling to negotiate the immense pressures that social media places on them, provides answers to longstanding questions.

As to the author, Donna Freitas is one of the most qualified—perhaps *the* most qualified—scholar in the nation to write this book. She has spent years traveling all over the United States talking directly with many hundreds of students at every kind of college and university, about their experiences online, their personal and social identities,

relationships, intimate emotions, sexual histories, views of their own generation, and much more. Freitas has profoundly and personally immersed herself in the worlds of which she writes and speaks—an up-close and labor-intensive research method for which there is no substitute. That gives her an unrivaled authority to write about these matters, one that deserves our hearing. Freitas is also an immensely talented interviewer, speaker, and writer. And, while she is adept at writing for and speaking to popular audiences, Freitas is a serious scholar who is careful about research methodology, data collection, and analysis. All of this makes her a rare combination of talents.

The book itself is also lucid and engaging—a real page-turner. Readers never have to trudge through difficult passages, numbers, or theories. The fascinating voices of distinct college students tell the stories for themselves. Yet those voices, in Freitas' skilled hands, add up to an exposition of important themes, insights, and conclusions that beg for our attention and response. The subject matter here is massively important, the engagement of it clear and captivating.

All of the above means that any number of people really *must* read this book, think hard about it, talk widely about its findings, and work on constructive responses: every parent and grandparent of children, teenagers, and twenty-somethings; every college and university student and administrator, student affairs worker, and faculty member; every middle and high school teacher and principal; every coach, youth pastor, and other youth worker who deals with teenagers and emerging adults; every young American who is not in college but in the work force or unemployed; every aunt, uncle, and mentor of youth; and every other person who cares about human beings benefitting from technological developments rather than being damaged by them. If you have a Facebook page, this book has much to teach you.

With this book now before us, we must all ask: are we capable of a response equal in seriousness to the massive consequences of the digital communications revolution that confront us?

Christian Smith
University of Notre Dame

PREFACE

TINY MEMOIRS

> *I think social media is kind of like a book cover: it*
> *can show what you are, but then also people*
> *can cover up themselves of what they are. Make*
> *themselves look better.*
>
> <div align="right">

Jason, junior, public university
> </div>

TRYING SO HARD TO FORGET OURSELVES

In a seminar on memoir that I taught at Hofstra University's Honors College, my five intellectually gifted and academically driven students contemplated falling madly in love while reading Patti Smith's *Just Kids*, what it's like to be young and Muslim via Eboo Patel's *Acts of Faith*, and the trials of grief in Joan Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking*. But there was something about memoir itself, about sitting down to contemplate life's meaning and purpose, that caused my students to question absolutely everything: their majors, their career paths, their backgrounds, the pursuit of true love. It pulled them up and out of their comfort zones and had them pouring out their deepest feelings. They talked endlessly of the overwhelming number of time-consuming commitments that ruled their days and nights and about how, when they stopped and took time to ask themselves why they were doing what they were doing, they weren't sure how to answer that question. It disturbed them.

There are so many things my students discussed that have stayed with me since that spring semester full of snowstorms and too-late spring blooms, but one in particular has played out in my mind over and over as I've done the research for this book.

One afternoon, after a particularly heavy snow, the students began to talk about their inability to sit still and their fear of doing so. *Fear.* This was the word they used. Being bored, having nothing to do, simply stopping and not using their phones to fill the silence. It scared them because their thoughts scared them. The way their thoughts about anything—life, relationships, love, work, school, family, friends, choices, their futures—would just *show up* in a way they couldn't control or block was very upsetting.

"I was just sitting there in my dorm room yesterday," one of the students was saying, "watching as the snowflakes were hitting the window and sliding down the glass." This student noticed how beautiful the snow was, they way it piled up and crystallized. He also noticed how peaceful he felt while watching it. But then, suddenly, in the silence and the stillness, other thoughts began to intrude, bigger thoughts about his life and what he was doing with it or, even more worrisome, what he was *not* doing with it. He began to feel a conflict as the uncomfortable collided with the beautiful and the serene. He was upset about his impulse to suppress these thoughts by grabbing his phone, because if he'd been on his phone he might never have had the discomfiting thoughts. But then again, if he'd picked up his phone, he would have missed this moment of beauty.

This was what upset him most of all: the possibility of missing the moment of beauty.

The young man went on to tell the class how he couldn't remember the last time he'd just enjoyed a small bit of beauty, let himself be taken by it. His *go, go, go, do, do, do* schedule and nearly constant résumé building and social media updating had robbed him of those moments. But his fear of the thoughts that followed, his inability to handle them, was behind his motivation to never let himself pause and open himself to the possibility of catching more of them.

How do we deal with this conflict? he wondered.

Should thinking be so scary?, the class asked collectively. Shouldn't we be able to pause and live in the moment? Wasn't this an important

thing to be able to do? If we aren't able to stop and think, will we ever be able to pursue the things that mean the most in life, or even know what might make our lives more meaningful? What if life becomes an endless cycle of escaping difficult thoughts?

Thoughts and feelings, the kinds of things that come up when we just sit and contemplate the world and our lives, can make us feel vulnerable. And while vulnerability can be uncomfortable, it is often the very thing that leads us to ask the important questions, the big ones that going to college and growing up are supposed to be about. On social media and via our devices, we are learning to shut out these things, these moments, these feelings.

We are putting up a shield around our own vulnerability.

I wasn't too far into this research before I knew that this study I'd begun on social media was really about happiness, about how young adults are learning they must appear happy at all times, presenting to the world what looks like the perfect life. Yet in always trying to appear happy, perfect, even inspiring and certainly enviable, we often neglect the very parts of ourselves that bring us true happiness, joy, connection, love, and pleasure. We become afraid of our true selves, of expressing who we really are, with all our flaws and imperfections. We begin to cover ourselves up, to clothe ourselves in words and images that mask the emotions and even the joys that define our hearts and minds and souls because they seem too intimate, and this intimacy seems inappropriate. We become good at hiding, we learn to excel at it, and society rewards us for the walls we've constructed with "likes" and "shares" and retweets and, ultimately, as young adults are learning so well, college acceptance letters and job interviews. By putting up these facades, by convincing our "audiences" not only that all is well but that all is *always* well, we sacrifice ourselves. By doing such a good job of "appearing happy," we risk losing the very things that make us happy.

When my student spoke of watching the snow fall against his window that day, of reveling in its beauty and then recoiling from what this moment of stillness evoked in his mind, he was really talking about recoiling from himself. Our devices and our compulsive posting and checking are helping us to flee ourselves. We are become masters of filtering away the bad and the sad and the negative. But in our attempts to polish away those imperfections and "put on a happy face," as one student

told me, as we try to forget the darker and more tender sides of our humanity, we also risk losing the best parts of who we are.

WE ARE WORTHY

When I started mentioning the idea of a "happiness effect" to my friends and colleagues, about how I worry that it is costing us our humanity, our authenticity, and the things that make our lives meaningful, everyone told me that I *must* watch Brené Brown's TED Talks. I hemmed and hawed for a while, then finally sat down and watched the first one, on vulnerability, moving quickly on to the second, about shame. I found myself crying as I listened to Brown speak so eloquently about how in our imperfections we find our own worthiness and are able to encounter love and belonging, and how, in order to live wholeheartedly, vulnerability is essential. To experience true belonging and connection, we must be able to own our imperfections and our messiness.

All the people who told me to watch Brown's talks were right—I needed to see them. In the one on vulnerability, Brown talks about how in our attempts to polish our images, to appear as if we have it all together, as if everything is in order and our lives are always great, we end up turning away from the very things that can make us whole. She speaks of how much we lose when we attempt to make ourselves invulnerable and how what we lose, really, is *everything*—love, belonging, the things that make us feel the most worthy.

Brown asks us to "let ourselves be seen," "to love with our whole hearts, even though there is no guarantee," "to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror," and "to believe that we are enough." To achieve connection, the thing that makes life worth living, we must strive to do all of these.

Yet the public nature of social media teaches us to strive for the opposite. Social media and the ways we are learning to navigate it, as well as the ways we teach our children and students to navigate it, go against everything Brown talks about that makes life meaningful. In our attempts to appear happy, to distract ourselves from our deeper, sometimes darker thoughts, we experience the opposite effect. In trying to always appear happy, we rob ourselves of joy. And after talking to nearly two hundred

college students and surveying more than eight hundred, I worry that social media is teaching us that we are not worthy. That it has us living in a perpetual and compulsive loop of such feedback. That in our constant attempts to edit out our imperfections for massive public viewing, we are losing sight of the things that ground our life in connection and love, in meaning and relationships.

Our brave faces are draining us. We're losing sight of our authentic selves.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS BOOK

When I set out to talk to college students about social media, I had no idea I'd end up writing so extensively about happiness. There was only one direct question in the interviews about happiness, yet happiness and everything related to it—being positive, hopeful, and even inspiring—came up all over the place in students' answers, no matter what the question. Happiness, at least the appearance of it, was a huge concern to them, as were the ills that stem from everyone's attempts to display happiness online, especially when those attempts ring hollow. The appearance of happiness has become so prized in our culture that it takes precedence over a person's actual happiness. By the time our children reach college, they know that a large part of their job is to present a happy face to the world, as they once might have presented a book report in class or performed a role in a school play. And we (the parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors in their lives) have helped push them to this place.

I don't believe these concerns are restricted to college students.

When I talk about the findings of this research with friends and colleagues, the conversation often sparks people to share their own struggles with online appearances versus the realities they live and experience. It is my hope that the themes addressed in this book will resonate with people far beyond college campuses. Everyone seems concerned with happiness, and never more so than when we attempt to paint our own portraits of it on our social media profiles.

There are many benefits to social media, primary among them (according to student participants in this research) the ability to connect with friends and loved ones who are far away. It is a basic tool for making

real-life plans. Social media can allow us to be playful, expressive, poetic, flirty, and even silly. But it is clear that image-consciousness and professional concerns among young adults are eclipsing these benefits.

As a professor and teacher of many years, and as a former professional in Student Affairs for many years, I want the young adults I work with to feel empowered with respect to the things that influence their lives, choices, relationships, and behavior. I want them to become good critical thinkers about these things because critical analysis helps us to have power over these forces rather than being swept up in the tide. There is no doubt that social media is a major influence in young people's lives. Social media is also one of the newest, fastest-changing influences for all of us. It's still so nascent that most of us are reeling in the face of it, and only recently have we, as a society, begun to unpack how it is changing and affecting us for good and for ill.

Many people and organizations seek to offer up-to-the-minute accounts of the latest social media trends. Their efforts are laudable, and I draw on some of their research, but my intent here is different.

My priority is to showcase the voices and stories so generously offered by the students I interviewed and surveyed so that their college peers, their younger siblings, and the adult mentors and parents in their lives will have the opportunity to continue these conversations at home, in residence halls, in the classroom, and in the workplace. My hope is that the young adults who read these pages find themselves, their friends, and their peers represented in a way that empowers discussions of the issues they find most relevant. I hope that faculty and university administrators as well as high school teachers and administrators find these voices and stories useful in their attempts to talk about these important themes both inside the classroom and out. I hope that adults will find themselves, and their own struggles and thrills around social media, represented in these pages. I also hope that parents will come away from this book with a greater understanding of some of the challenges their children might face as they shift from high school to college while engaging in their near-constant public lives on social media. The students represented here demand our attention and call us to the conversation—and it will be a complicated one.

Listening to other people's stories can make us feel vulnerable. Stories open us up and empower us to talk about things we normally

might never tell another soul. I think that's why, whenever I teach my memoir class, it always ends up hitting students at a deep level. When we are in the presence of others who have shown us their best and also their worst, their successes and failures, their joys and their deepest moments of pain, their stories call forth the same in us, they stir up the good and the bad, they ask us to look at love and loss, its presence and absence, our greatest triumphs and our darkest moments. They humanize us and call forth empathy.

The stories that follow are funny, sad, shocking, beautiful, frightening, insightful, and very, very real. I loved hearing what the students had to say, and I hope you love reading about them. They are the heart and soul of my research and the heart and soul of this book. I hope they open you up in thought-provoking ways that spark lots of conversations and big questions, like the memoirs that work their way into the hearts and minds of my students.

The stories presented here, I think, are like tiny memoirs of their own.

THE HAPPINESS EFFECT

INTRODUCTION

Masters of Happiness

I think that people want to show other people that they're happy. It's like a happiness competition sometimes, which is funny because I think if you're really happy, you don't feel that need to show other people that you're having a good time.

> Blake, senior, private-secular university

It's kind of like how everybody says with their high school reunion, they want to go back and show off how great their life is. It's like that now, but you don't have to wait for your ten-year reunion. It's like that every day.

> Brandy, junior, private-secular university

EMMA: THE WORST VERSION OF ME VERSUS THE BEST VERSION OF EVERYONE ELSE

Early on a sunny Saturday morning, Emma shuffles into the interview room. She has just rolled out of bed after a night of partying. Her hair is

pulled back into a high ponytail, and she is adorned, head to toe, in sorority attire, T-shirt and sweats bearing Greek letters. I'm visiting Emma's southern, Greek-dominated university during homecoming week, and ever since I arrived, I've had to step over fraternity brothers and sorority sisters sprawled on the floor of the student center, building floats for the upcoming parade.[1]

Even in sweats, Emma is stunning. Her eyes are tired, and she might be nursing a hangover, but Emma is effortlessly beautiful, the kind of girl who surely sparks envy among her peers. What's more, Emma is smart and very invested in her studies. A junior honors student, Emma has a double major in finance and psychology to go with her status as an officer at Alpha Alpha, her university's most prestigious sorority. If there is a social hierarchy at this school—and there pretty much always is—then Emma is at the top of it.

On the day we meet, however, she is *so over* being a sorority girl. Emma is incredibly unhappy, and she's not afraid to show it. She's frustrated with Greek life and especially with the pressures that come with being so high up on the food chain. It makes life ridiculous, Emma says. And social media just makes things worse.

Emma rolls her eyes so many times when talking about sorority life that I lose count. "Every house has its own reputation, and its own facet of people that fit into that house," she tells me. "I'm not exactly congruent with the type of people that are in my house, so that's been a challenge in getting to know people and, you know, where I fit in. I don't really like to party or drink, and my sorority is known for that." She pauses to roll her eyes. "We're also known for working out excessively, not really eating—that's pretty much every sorority on campus." Emma's tone is sing-song, as if she thinks everything about sorority life is absurd. Her facial expressions are exaggerated, almost theatrical. "[My sorority sisters] don't like to be challenged in relationships and questioned because that would require having an opinion and a brain." On the surface Emma might sound snobby, and she is certainly angry, but I detect an unmistakable sadness beneath everything she's saying. Her comments prompt me to ask why Emma belongs to a sorority at all. "If you're not in a Greek organization, it's extremely hard to make friends," she says. Then she grins a bit wickedly. "If you *are* in a Greek organization, it's extremely hard to make friends, but people automatically *have* to like you if you're

wearing your letters. Or, at least, they have to automatically be nice to you because there are repercussions if they're not. Not because they're good people and they like you—it's that, you know, they'll get in trouble if they don't. So it forces a sense of camaraderie and this illusion of belonging on the part of the individual. It just forces the system to expedite the whole making friends process."[2]

Despite Emma's problems with Greek life in general and her prestigious sorority in particular, she claims she's happy she joined because "I would rather the social stigma of [Alpha Alpha] be on me than the social stigma of someone who's *not* in a sorority. It's the lesser of two evils."

Particularly hellish, I learn, is the period when sororities on campus are courting new members. Emma and her sisters spend up to twelve hours daily, "practicing chants and going over matching and how to bump someone, and just all the logistical nonsense that goes into formal recruitment on the side of the chapter." This year, Emma is trying to "limit the hypocrisy" on her part (eye-roll), so she got herself excused from recruiting. She didn't want to stand there and tell new students how her sorority "is everything."

After a couple years in Greek life, Emma has very little faith in a person's ability to be honest about who they are. "I think, in general, people are not very authentic," she says. "I'm probably jaded, and not maliciously, I just think there's so much pressure to fit in with the mold, that there's no way there's this many people that actually behave that way, and if there are, then God has a sick sense of humor, and we're all clones of each other."

This is when she turns to social media.

"People do [social media] for the 'likes.' People take pictures, experience things, go places for the reaction that they're going to get on social media." Emma hates the fact that people she knows on campus will do things just so they can post pictures on Instagram. "Obviously, I don't go around saying, 'I think all of you are fake and snobbish and unintelligent' and things like that," Emma says, even though that is obviously what she believes. "That is my authentic opinion, but I would be a leper if I shared that opinion. So I definitely am guilty of just going with the flow, wearing my [sorority] letters, because of the reputation that I have because of it, because of the esteem that my house holds on this campus. . . . Why make it more difficult for yourself if you have the opportunity to make it easier by wearing a shirt, or by wearing a button, or by telling someone

you're an [Alpha Alpha], or by telling someone you're part of this or that? I don't think anyone should make it harder on themselves unnecessarily. So I am hypocritical in that sense, that I have all these opinions, but I am very much one way with the people that I am close to in my family and another way with the general public."

Emma is clearly disgusted by the state of things and by how social media exacerbates inauthenticity among her friends and peers, but she is also disgusted with herself for going along with this charade. Emma has both Instagram and Facebook accounts. I ask Emma if it's tiring, being one way in public but feeling like a completely different person in private.

"Yeah, it is, but I think that everyone is like that," she says. "I put things online that people are going to respond well to. I stay far away from any political platform, religious platform. I don't post statuses on Facebook. I think that my life is interesting to me, and I enjoy it. My mother loves hearing about it, my boyfriend loves hearing about it, but outside of ten or fifteen people, my fourteen hundred Facebook friends don't care. Sometimes I'll upload pictures to Facebook and Instagram if I think I look pretty and I'm going to get a lot of 'likes,'" Emma admits. Even as she dismisses her Facebook friends, she can't help but mention the impressive number of them. Emma participates in social media, but she thinks it has spawned a "very weird culture." "People used to do things and *then* post them, and the approval you gained from whatever you were putting out there was a byproduct of the actual activity," she says. "Now the *anticipated* approval is what's driving the behavior or the activity, so there's just sort of been this reversal. Not everyone is that way, obviously. I just feel like the majority of this campus [is], judging by some of the things that I've overheard in my sorority house."

Being a sorority sister exacerbates this, Emma thinks. "If someone who was highly associated with Alpha Alpha were to do something like protest for gay rights and put it on social media, people would be taken aback," she tells me. Politics—anything potentially controversial—is off limits for sorority sisters. "If someone who was *not* in a Greek organization were to protest for gay rights and put it on Instagram or Facebook, that would make more sense. It would be more congruent with the category we lump those people into." Emma rolls her eyes. "I just said 'those people,' so there you go. That's how it is. It's very Greek/not Greek.... Even amongst Greek life, we have tiers. We have top-tier sororities, we

have secondary sororities, we have third tier." Emma goes on to name the sororities and fraternities on campus and how they associate, or don't, with each other, and how anyone on campus who isn't a part of Greek life is called a GDI (God Damn Independent; this was the first time I hear this acronym, but not the last). The careful social hierarchy the Greeks have constructed plays out online in a big way, Emma says.

But not necessarily in the way you might think, with a constant stream of wild party photos. Far from it. The era of posting pictures of frat boys doing keg stands and girls chugging beers at parties is over. Emma tells me, "We have social media workshops about what is appropriate for social media because my sorority engages in some pretty questionable behavior that needs to be discussed, that we can't put online." Everyone knows that bad behavior happens; you just need to make sure not to take pictures of it to broadcast on Instagram. Emma thinks that her sorority does "more bad things than good things," which is also why the sorority helps its sisters choose which photos to put up on social media. She shakes her head. "The hell that would come down on you if you were to share or be tagged in any kind of photo that is congruent with our actual behavior and not this '[Alpha Alpha's] sisters are smart,' and '[Alpha Alpha's] sisters are responsible,' and blah, blah, blah. You would be sent to standards, and you would be ripped a new one."

Emma's sorority (like many sororities and fraternities, she indicates) has a designated person who monitors all social media activity among the members. This person at Alpha Alpha has pseudonymous accounts on various social media platforms, and if she "likes" any posts or photos a sister puts online, this means they are inappropriate and must be taken down immediately. "Your picture better be off every social media platform" within twenty-four hours, Emma says. Emma's sorority also monitors the social media accounts of those seeking to join. The sisters take screen shots of behavior that is not up to Alpha Alpha standards. "Any behavior that is not congruent with being an [Alpha Alpha] is questioned," she says.

Despite being annoyed by her sorority and overwhelmed by the expectation to be a public, personal example of the kind of girl the sorority wants to advertise to the world, Emma finds herself doing exactly that— projecting a fake version of herself. "It's just interesting," she tells me. "I put forth [Alpha Alpha's] version of myself on social media." Everybody

else is doing it, so she goes along and does it, too. In part, Emma is driven by what she sees everyone else posting. She doesn't want to appear to be falling behind, having less fun, being less spectacular. Even a beautiful, accomplished young woman from the most prestigious sorority on campus sometimes sees things on social media and starts to feel bad about herself.

As Emma's reflections progress, cracks appear in the hardened attitude she's trying to project. "People share the best version of themselves, and we compare that to the worst version of ourselves," she comments. "I know I've done it." "Over the summer, everyone was in bathing suits all the time, posting fun pictures," she went on, "and I said, you know, 'Wow, I want that.' Like, I forget what I have. Like, I would like to look like that."

Here, Emma hits on something that many students expressed, though none quite so succinctly or vividly: that on social media people are seeing only the "best versions" of their friends and acquaintances, which have been edited and curated down to the last glorious detail. Yet, behind the screen, they are still themselves, with all their imperfections, insecurities, and perceived failures. To hear Emma say this is startling and telling because she seems to be the epitome of what others would envy and wish to be. But in the end, Emma is just like everyone else. Social media can bring down even the most popular and successful students on campus.

Remaining rational while viewing one's Facebook feed and other people's Instagram photos is no easy feat, according to Emma. She knows on an intellectual level that people are posting only happy things and pretty pictures and not sharing anything difficult in their lives. She knows that not everyone is as perfect and as happy as they seem on their social media accounts. But being exposed nearly constantly to everyone else's veneer of happiness can get to a person after a while. Emma may know that what she's seeing isn't reality, but it's one thing to know this and another to scroll through an endless stream of beautiful, smiling faces while sitting alone in your room.

"I think I'm a very confident person, and I recognize that the pictures I'm seeing on social media are not anyone's struggles or anything like that," Emma says. "I know not to compare myself, you know, when I'm having a bad day, to these images that I see because that's not *them* having a bad day. So I think that it can very much affect self-esteem if you let it, and if you are under the illusion that, you know, this person is

perfect and this is how they are all the time, nothing goes wrong in their life, blah blah blah." Emma offers the example of a girl she knows who is on antidepressants but who posts pictures "throwing her hands up and jumping in the air, so happy." Emma realizes "there is a lack of congruency between who we are as people and the image that we put out there." People shouldn't put a lot of stock in what others share on social media, she says, because "it's very shallow," but sometimes you just can't help it. "I feel like, [on social media], it's the best version of people," Emma comments for the second time. "It's just sort of a slap in the face. It allows a platform to brag, and if you are experiencing, you know, [lonely] feelings, it makes it a little harder, a little more obvious that you're alone or lonely, or whatever the case may be."

Emma feels immense pressure to live up to the image of perfection that she sees on social media—not to mention living up to the expectations of her high-achieving, image-conscious sorority sisters. But there is also the pressure to be perfect for an entirely different audience: future employers. "We have all these talks [on campus] about employers checking social media regularly," Emma says. "There's a lot of opinions that are formed based on people's social media platforms, rightly or wrongly, so just the gravity that it has on society today is a little unnerving. People cannot get jobs, or not get interviews because of what they put on social media." Students have this drilled into them, and it makes them incredibly anxious about what they post. Here, too, is pressure to be some perfect version of yourself.

The only time people are really honest about anything on social media, in Emma's opinion, is when they are anonymous. Protecting one's identity is paramount. You need to go to sites like Yik Yak—a popular app at colleges, a sort of anonymous Twitter feed tied to a person's geographical location—to see anything "real" about what's happening on campus. "I would like to pretend that I'm a good enough person not to get on Yik Yak and see what is being put out there," Emma tells me. Yet she's not—she's on her university's Yik Yak, just like just everyone else. "But it's Animal House. . . . If I were looking at this university as a senior in high school again, and I had access to the profiles of people in Greek organizations at [my school], and Yik Yak was a thing, I would not be here."

Unlike Facebook and Instagram, where what you see is a carefully crafted showcase of a person's best, happiest, prettiest moments, what you

see on sites like Yik Yak is reality, according to Emma. Nobody is honest on platforms that require real names to be attached to their posts, but give a student body anonymity, and people go to town—often in the ugliest of ways. "I feel like unfortunately [what's on Yik Yak] is a pretty accurate representation of what happens at [my school]," Emma explains. "It is calling people out for everything. People use specific names, like 'Sarah is a whore. She hooked up with this person, this person, this person, this person, this person, this person.' And, 'So and so does cocaine.' And, '[Delta Betas] are,' and any kind of degrading comment you can think of."

The people who get attacked, maligned, and degraded on anonymous campus feeds are usually women, in part, Emma believes, because men are more drawn to Yik Yak. "Girls don't really post on Yik Yak," she says. "I'd like to think it's because we know how it feels to be spoken of poorly, in such a public arena, and so we wouldn't want to put anyone else through that." But maybe it's the women Emma knows in her sorority who aren't posting, since her sorority's sisters aren't allowed to post on it—ever. "The week that [Yik Yak] got popular, we were called into [Alpha Alpha]. '[Alpha Alpha] does not comment. [Alpha Alphas] do no post on Yik Yak,'" Emma mimics. Underlying this edict is the belief that the anonymity promised by the app is an illusion, and Emma's sorority is not willing to take any chances when it comes to its very esteemed, yet very precarious, reputation. "It's very much the whole Snapchat thing; it doesn't disappear, there's a record of it. Yes, after twenty-four hours, [Yaks are] no longer at the bottom of the page, but the IP address that's associated with your phone is associated with everything that you do through the app, and that's dangerous. [Alpha Alpha] is concerned about what we put out there. We have been on social probation in the past for doing things, like getting caught doing cocaine in the house, so we're very careful about what we're putting out there, regardless of the alleged anonymity that Yik Yak provides." The fact that inappropriate posts are seen as the equivalent of using cocaine tells you how concerned people are about social media.

Despite Emma's frustrations about what she sees as the inauthenticity of social media, the drama it causes, and the ways in which it makes her feel bad about herself, she doesn't really think about quitting any of her accounts—though I eventually learn that she has tried to do so. Sort of. She once gave up social media for Lent but has no plans of doing

something like that again. For Emma, there's "entertainment value" in social media, and she doesn't want to miss out on it. She deserves the entertainment, really, given all the stress social media causes her. The same goes for Emma's relationship to her smartphone. She simply can't be without it.

"If I don't have my phone, I feel empty," she says. "You know, if it's not in my hands, I feel like I'm forgetting something, I'm missing something. Even though when I'm with people, I make a conscious effort not to be on my phone at dinner, at lunch, in social situations. . . . I will leave it in my bag at dinner. I won't take it out at dinner with my boyfriend or with friends or anything like that. Even if we're eating dinner at home, it's not on the table in front of me. But I've never, I *don't* leave it at home, because if something happens, I need to have it." Indeed, Emma considers it dangerous to be without it. At this point she reflects on how there has been a number of sexual assaults reported on campus recently, and because of this she "would hate to be without her phone." Today, especially if you are a young woman, a smartphone "is very much a necessity."

Although Emma is an extraordinary young woman, when it comes to her struggles with social media, she is absolutely ordinary. She is concerned about getting "likes." She gets caught up in the comparison trap, constantly seeing the "best versions" of people on social media, which makes her feel bad about herself. She believes that keeping up online and being always available on her smartphone is almost a job (though one that comes with definite entertainment value). But Emma is typical with regard to the pressures she feels to maintain a positive, nearly perfect appearance on her social media accounts, and she is extremely careful about what she posts as a result.

I ask Emma if there's anything else she wants to mention before we end our interview. "I think the weight of [social media] is a little concerning," she says. "But we do it to ourselves."

THE HAPPINESS EFFECT

During the course of the last decade, I've traveled to well over a hundred colleges and universities to discuss my research about college students,

sex, and faith. In doing so, I've had the opportunity to listen to students all over the United States describe their concerns and struggles with life on campus. We've talked over dinner and in small groups for coffee and in classes. Inevitably, these discussions widened to involve questions about meaning and purpose in general, about identity, and about what it's like to be a young adult in the first generation that has grown up with social media.

It doesn't seem to matter whether I am visiting a Catholic university in the Midwest or a private-secular college in the South; social media is on everybody's minds of late. Students can't stop talking about it. Questions about the various stresses it provokes in today's college experience are nearly constant. Students discuss the notion of the "real me" versus the "online me" and the dissonance they feel between these, the pressure to document publicly a certain kind of college experience, their fears about making themselves vulnerable on social media, and their worries about how to maintain real, meaningful relationships when a seemingly artificial online world dominates their social lives. Students want to know what their peers think about social media and whether they experience the same struggles. They want, in other words, information about how their generation is handling one of the most significant and dramatic cultural shifts of our time. Most of all, they want to know that they are not alone in feeling the way they do.

That students are aware they are splitting themselves in two—that they somehow *have* to do this to operate effectively and safely online—has been particularly fascinating and worrisome to me. It's not as though students don't talk about the joys of social media—they do. They love the ease of the connections it offers among far-off family and friends, and many of them love the ways that social media affords a certain creativity and opportunity for self-expression. But they are also exhausted by it. There are many things with which they struggle, things that unnerve them, that make life difficult and even painful, and they don't know where to turn to talk about them with any honesty. Many young adults experience some kind of alienation because of social media, but they are further alienated because they don't see a thriving public discussion about the struggles they are experiencing—perhaps because those struggles aren't as racy or extreme as the ones that are the stuff of newspaper and magazine headlines.[3]

Media coverage of social media often focuses only on the belief that this generation is the most narcissistic generation ever, or on the scariest examples of what happens to young people online—predatory behavior, risqué pictures that get circulated, and cyberbullying and related suicides.[4] Clearly, these are important issues. But while young adults and college students buckling under the pressure to project a false self online may not be as sexy (literally) as teens sexting nude photos to each other, it's a pervasive struggle, and we need to talk about it with them.[5]

So, beginning in the spring semester of 2014 and continuing on through the spring semester of 2015, I visited thirteen colleges and universities to conduct private, one-on-one interviews with nearly two hundred randomly sampled young men and women. I also conducted an online survey of students who volunteered to share their opinions in a series of essays.[6] After both the interviews and the online surveys, I feel confident in saying that the social media world is a far less scary place overall than the press would have us believe, and that the young adults with whom I spoke are as smart and thoughtful as ever. They are doing their best to navigate a dimension of culture so new and different—and so pervasive— that it sets their generation apart. Like most of us, young adults have no choice but to confront social media in their lives.[7] It shapes their identities, their relationships, and the ways in which they make meaning—or don't. It troubles them, but it's also a sphere in which they are learning to work out the dimensions of their social lives and identities in much the same way that my generation did as we rode our bikes through the neighborhood and hung out on the playground.

It didn't take long to find out that one of the most central concerns college students struggle with, however, is the feeling that they are constantly monitored on social media—potentially by anyone and everyone. When they were still in high school, they were wary of their parents, their teachers, and the admissions officers at the colleges they hoped to attend. When they arrive on campus, they believe that future employers will be assessing their every post. Emma had the added pressure of her sorority, which was literally monitoring everything she did online. I heard similar accounts from Greeks at other universities I visited, but everywhere I went students talked about people who were monitoring them: athletic coaches, Student Affairs staff, professors, the Career Center, Campus Ministry. One student who had dreams of holding political office was

concerned about future constituents. Students even worried about other students who liked to keep an eye out for potentially offending or negative posts by their peers.

The result is that students create carefully crafted, fantasy versions of themselves online. But on platforms that allow for anonymous posts, things get really dark.

In the best of circumstances, apps that come with the promise of anonymity and impermanence—like Yik Yak, Snapchat, and the anonymous Twitter feeds and Facebook groups students create for venting, confessing, and other types of honesty not found elsewhere—serve as cathartic forums in which highly pressured and highly monitored young adults can finally be themselves. Sometimes they are playful and silly. Yet the kind of commentary that often bubbles up can be incredibly vicious, revealing a nasty underbelly to the student body that shocks even the students themselves. Simply put, anonymous forums tend to degenerate into cesspools of obnoxious, cruel, and sexist comments, in which students treat each other (and their professors) in the worst possible ways, and entire campuses find out exactly how vile and racist certain members of the student body can be.[8]

A "work hard, play hard" mentality often prevails on campus. Extremely stressed, high-achieving, incredibly busy college students work extraordinarily hard at their studies, sports, and activities during the week but then party like crazy and drink as heavily as they can on the weekend, believing they "deserve" to engage in such behavior because they are so overburdened the rest of the time. This mentality seems to transfer online. Students feel they must maintain a perfect, happy veneer on Facebook and other profiles attached to their names. They must be that high-achieving, do-no-wrong, unstoppable, successful young woman or man with whom everyone would be proud to associate, to have as a son or daughter, to boast about as a resident assistant or a member of a team, and, eventually, to hire. Many students have begun to see what they post (on Facebook, especially) as a chore—a homework assignment to build a happy facade—and even to resent such work. Then they "play hard" on sites like Yik Yak where they have learned to unleash, to let go, and often go a bit crazy—even if people get hurt in the process. They deserve to let loose, after all, since it's tiring to be so perfect all of the time.

The colleges and universities I visited were incredibly diverse—geographically, ethnically, socioeconomically, and in terms of their religious affiliation or lack of one and their level of prestige. Yet across them all, one unifying and central theme emerged as the most pressing social media issue students face:

The importance of *appearing* happy.

And not just happy but, as a number of students informed me, blissful, enraptured, even inspiring. I heard this at one of the most elite private institutions in the United States and at a school that doesn't even appear high enough on the rankings for people to care where it ranks. The imperative transcends every demographic category.

The pressure to appear happy seems universal. In fact, it came up so often in the interviews that I asked about it directly in the online survey. Students responded to the following statement by indicating "yes" or "no" (or "not applicable"):

I try always to appear positive/happy with anything attached to my real name.

Of the students who chose to answer this question, 73 percent said yes. Only 20 percent said no.[9]

What makes these data especially important is how ubiquitous social media has become.[10] Out of the 884 students who participated in the online survey, only 30—a mere 3 percent—said they did not have any social media accounts. For the vast majority who do, students were asked how often they check their various social media accounts per day. The results are shown in Figure I.1.

It's clear from these data that students are checking their accounts compulsively throughout the day, with approximately 31 percent of students checking at minimum twenty-five times and potentially up to a hundred.

Given the amount of time young people spend on social media, the pressure to appear happy online can become overwhelming. Adolescents learn early how important it is to everyone around them that they polish their online profiles to promote their accomplishments, popularity, and general well-being. They practice this nearly constantly in their online lives and this has a tremendous effect on them—emotionally, in their relationships, and in their behavior on social media. For better or worse, students are becoming masters of appearing happy, at significant cost. This is what
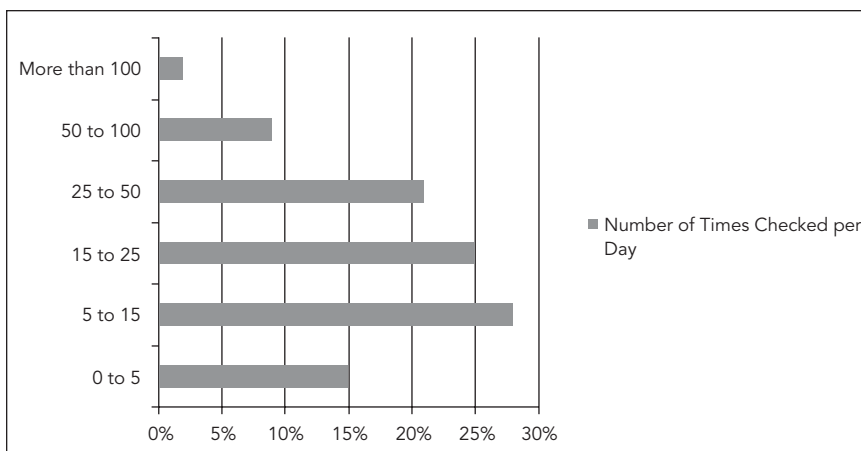
Figure I.1 | Daily Levels of Social Media Usage

I've come to think of as the "happiness effect." Simply put, because young people feel so pressured to post happy things on social media, most of what everyone sees on social media from their peers are happy things; as a result, they often feel inferior because they aren't actually happy all the time. The chapters that follow all explore themes that emerge from this larger issue.

The happiness effect not only has implications for the emotional health and well-being of the young adults in our lives but also has repercussions for the way we parent and how institutions of higher education help (or hinder or ignore) how students experience college and interact with the wider world. Anyone who works in higher education as faculty, staff, or administration, who is a parent, or who works as a high school teacher or counselor needs to think broadly and deeply about what we are doing when we teach our children that proper online behavior requires the appearance of happiness—because they are learning it *from us*, even if we do not practice it ourselves—and boy do they notice when we don't. We need to reflect, very seriously, on the message we are sending. It may seem like a logical and responsible thing to teach our young people—post only happy, flattering, achievement-oriented things—but when the young people receiving this message are on social media nearly constantly, what seems like a simple rule can have extraordinary consequences.

If students have not already imbibed the lesson that a happy appearance is the right appearance on social media, they will certainly learn it