



The harm of social media validation: A question of responsibility and protecting the vulnerable



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By Sean Herman (<https://marketingtechnews.net/news/author/seanherman/>) | 18th April 2019 | Kinzoo (<https://www.kinzoo.com/>)

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Sean Herman is the founder of Kinzoo. Kinzoo is driven by the mission to create secure spaces for kids and their families to stay close – no matter where they are. Sean is a father of two, an entrepreneur, and a business leader.

Humans have an innate desire to be liked by peers and to feel a sense of belonging – and nowhere is this more prevalent than social media. The more likes, comments, and shares a post gets, the more socially validated the poster feels.

In fact, studies show that just these online reactions release [\(http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2018/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time/\)](http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2018/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time/) dopamine (<http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2018/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time/>) in our brains, which makes us feel happy. Like gamblers at a slot machine, we anticipate a certain response when posting something online: Who will like my photo? Will it attract more likes than my last post or my friend's post?

Not surprisingly, social media platforms know all about this and find ways to keep us (and advertisers) [coming back for more](https://adage.com/article/digital/sean-parker-worries-facebook-rotting-children-s-brains/311238/) (<https://adage.com/article/digital/sean-parker-worries-facebook-rotting-children-s-brains/311238/>). While it's good for revenue – after all, marketers are willing to hand over more money if they know their ads will be seen – social validation and its addictive nature are detrimental to both adults and kids

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When I was young, I used to be disappointed if my friends didn't laugh at my jokes. Luckily, it wasn't hard to move on from that. But now, rather than feeling pressure to be the funniest kid in class, there's pressure to be the most attractive kid on the internet. For young users especially, competing with classmates for likes and comments may actually lead to [depression and anxiety](#). (<https://www.kinzoo.com/blog/24/behind-the-screen-how-likes-and-hearts-on-social-media-affect-kids>), as these elements of social validation are sometimes prioritised over real friendships.

How to create a safe online space for kids

With great power comes great responsibility. Social media professionals and advertisers need to recognise their own roles in minimising the effects of social validation, especially if they're working with platforms intended for younger audiences. Here are a few specific ways to keep kids safe:

Avoid likes, shares, comments

Screen time and social media validation aren't wholly to blame for the spike in depression, anxiety, and [suicide](#) (<https://hartfordhealthcare.org/about-us/news-press/news-detail?articleId=17200&publicid=469>), among younger generations; studies point to a variety of causes. However, the competitive aspect of social media platforms does pose a threat to children and teens who might already be vulnerable or struggling.

For these reasons, platforms that allow children under age 13 to have accounts should not feature social validation metrics or make use of bots that automatically follow new users, like their posts, and leave comments. To put it simply, these are manipulative features that give children a false sense of belonging, and children should not be exposed to them.

Make use of less permanent features such as stories

Social scorecards and vanity metrics are permanently displayed online, which can contribute to anxiety. On some of today's most popular platforms, for example, users can scroll through years of their friends' and followers' posts. To make platforms safer for children – and to remove likes and comments from the picture – we need to think about how to reach and engage with users through less permanent ways, such as stories.

The "story" feature was [created by Snapchat in 2013](#) (<https://www.fastcompany.com/90252767/4-tips-on-how-to-succeed-with-stories>) but has since been adopted by both Instagram and Facebook. Features like this allow users to post content that disappears within 24 hours. As these features grow, it begs more consideration from advertisers and social media professionals to avoid having kids' self-worth attached to permanently displayed performance metrics.

Look for ways to prioritise family time

Many adults use social media because it enables them to reconnect with people from their pasts, whether they've just lost touch or have been separated by distance. Younger users, however, don't often need to use these platforms for the same reason.

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Rather, platforms intended for children need to focus a lot less on friend and follower counts, and a lot more on family and close friends only. This helps kids to learn and understand the true value of sharing content online. When they return to the site, it won't be because they're craving a hit of dopamine but because of their genuine interest in connecting with people.

The ideal family-friendly platform is also private and free from user data tracking. Kids need a safe, fun environment where they can be themselves and where families can share their love and support – without counting likes.

Social media has been, perhaps ingeniously, engineered to exploit everyone's natural desire for validation. Our children are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of this engineering. Whether you're building the next social media network or you're a parent giving kids access to a phone, consider it your responsibility to keep children safe.

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