LIKE ME
An exploration into the impact of social media on our mental well-being from a speculative design perspective.
ABSTRACT

What impact do social media have on mental well-being and how can design become a tool for increasing awareness among users?

To interact on social media means to find new ways of seeking a sense of belonging, of being part of a society that can validate our existence and attribute value to what we decide to share. But what happens when there is a gap separating the ways in which we create value and sense of self-worth online and offline? How does it impact our mental well-being and the capacity to become a productive element of our society?

Like Me is a speculative design project that explores the gap between the virtual and the real, while researching how it impacts our mental well-being and sense of self-worth in society. This Bachelor’s thesis delves into this topic through design methods and visual communication, resulting in a short fictional film about a speculative scenario. The aim of this research is to raise a discussion about embracing what is to come, finding a new sense of awareness to improve our impact on social sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Speculative design; Social sustainability; Social media; Mental well-being; Mirrors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research work was inspired by the creative, constructive, multicultural and fulfilling environment that my colleagues, lecturers and coordinators were able to create during the past three years studying Design+Change. The development of this project was made possible by all the collective and individual feedback sessions with other students and lecturers of Linnaeus University, which were most often available and very dedicated when it came to sharing thoughts and ideas.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

2.0 MAPPING THE GAP
| Context .......................................................................................................................... 2

  2.1 Online and offline ways of expression ................................................................. 2
  2.2 The reward and instant gratification systems ...................................................... 4
  2.3 Low-risk confrontation ......................................................................................... 6

3.0 METRICS VS. FEELINGS
| Theoretical framework and exploration through design methods ................................ 7

  3.1 A system of numbers ............................................................................................ 7
  3.2 Disorder-like behaviours ....................................................................................... 9

4.0 BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION: A SPECULATIVE DESIGN APPROACH
| Design process, contributions and results .............................................................. 12

  4.1 About speculative design ....................................................................................... 12
  4.2 Mirrors .................................................................................................................. 13
  4.3 Like Me: a short, speculative film ......................................................................... 13

5.0 LIKE ME, LIKE YOU: EMBRACING FUTURES
| Final observations and conclusions .......................................................................... 16

  5.1 A discrepancy in perception .................................................................................. 16
  5.2 Who is at stake ...................................................................................................... 17
  5.3 Highlighting the social impact ............................................................................... 18

NOTES .............................................................................................................................. 20

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................. 22

TABLE OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................... 23
To begin with, I decided to create a glossary that will guide you while reading the following chapters in order to attribute contextualised meaning to the following commonly used words.

**Social media**: any online platform that gives to its users the ability to communicate with one another, either publicly and/or privately. Some examples are: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Snapchat, some online newspapers, online games, forums and more.

**Social media/online interactions**: Liking, disliking, commenting on something online.

**We, us**: Social media users, including myself.

**Currency**: A system that attributes value to things or, like in the case of this research, to individuals.

**Self-worth**: The way in which we value ourselves in real life.

**Disorder-like**: When one or more of an individual’s behaviours resemble those that characterize a psychological disorder, although they are not actually suffering from that disorder.

**Speculative**: That looks into the future and creates a fictional scenario which wants to bring attention to a current situation.

**Design**: A field in which the designer is able to create, improve or criticise a new or pre-existent system, narrative, scenario or item. This field of work and research is inherently connected to social, economical and environmental sustainability.

**Social sustainability**: A life-enhancing condition within communities and a process within communities that can achieve [and maintain] that condition.

As social media became an essential part of our lives, our day to day experience has dramatically changed. The possibility to be constantly connected gives a new importance to our online profiles, which are now relevant to our private and professional life, dictating the decisions we make on what we want - or do not want - to share with others. In the last decade, many studies have been conducted on whether or not this new way of living might impact our mental well-being, as it is becoming harder for social media users to draw a sharp line between their online and offline personas.

The influence that our online-selves play nowadays, creates new meanings around the concepts of value and self-worth, which are often affected by numbers and online marketing strategies rather than by well informed decisions and by the pursuit of personal growth.

The algorithms behind social media interactions create a system for recognition based on engagement, which at the same time makes the economic system (what generates a company’s monetary income) keep moving. Therefore, our need for engagement as users is based on a currency of likes which is represented by the clicking and tapping on our smart devices. But the risks that this system raises are those of an addictive approach to the online world and a of a distorted sense of reality - where instant rewards are unlikely to happen. At the same time, the importance that we attribute to likes and dislikes plays a strong role when we begin to attach emotional value to them. One way to become more self aware and embrace the beauty of social media, with all the possibilities that they offer, is to pay attention to the decisions that we make and to the quality of time that we spend online. Social media exist thanks to those who engage with it, the users, us, who can determine their future and range of impact.

Like Me is a project that aims to raise a discussion around the topic of social media and mental well-being, by looking into speculative scenarios. This is done by producing a short film which, with its critical approach, wants to represent what is happening in our present lives. The short film can also be seen as an alternative reality, where our normality is altered and made into a fictional, yet relatable scenario. The stylistic choices play with feelings of excitement, unsettlement and calmness, where dialogues are replaced by facial expressions and body language, while long pauses want to deliver a message more effectively than words can.
Why \textbf{Like Me}? The title of this speculative design project speaks for a number of key concepts:
- “Like me” as the request, the need to be liked and to receive validation online;
- “Like me” meaning “just as me” and as you, to depict the fact that we all give shape to what social media are nowadays and can become in the future;
- The line across the word “like” shows the discussion I want to open by asking questions such as: do I need to be liked online? What am I like online? Am I behaving unlike myself online?

\section*{2.0 Mapping the Gap | Context}

In order to tackle this broad topic, it soon became important for me to take a closer look at the different ways in which we act and interact online and offline. The research I conducted revealed a gap between these two worlds that represents a reason for internal conflict when it comes to defining ourselves and our sense of self worth.

In this section I will explain what I mean by different ways to express ourselves online and offline, to then go into detail about the two main inputs that lay behind this type of dynamic.

\subsection*{2.1 Online and offline ways of expression}

Smiling, nodding, pausing, staring. Elements of a language that get lost in translation when we are expressing ourselves online. The touch of a button and rhythmic clicks replace and hide what our bodies have known how to do since the day we were born, as the contrast between how we behave online and offline defines a gap that can affect the way in which we value ourselves in relationship to others. The amount of time that we spend engaging online and its impact on us have been researched since social media broke into our lives, a change that happened as suddenly as intensely. Although this
field of research is relatively new due to the pace at which technological advancement moves, if we look at the way in which we carry out our daily activities most of us will be able to point out areas that were affected during the past decade: the time we spend to find anything we are in need of - whether it is the address of a restaurant or a romantic relationship - has drastically decreased, giving shape to a system based on instant rewards. This type of reward system does not only allow us to become more time efficient when it comes to accomplishing daily tasks, but it also creates a risk for addictive behaviours to the online environment, where anything we need is always at our fingertips, in contrast to the real world. The specific case scenario that I am about to analyze in this thesis project is the value created around online interactions, in the form of expressing enjoyment and disapproval using a system of likes and dislikes, where a reward system affects the sense of self worth of individuals online and offline.

During a focus group conducted at Linnaeus University (Växjö, Sweden) with three students from the Design+Change program, participants were asked to think about the different types of language that they use online and offline to express similar intentions. Although the results of this focus group are based on the personal experience of a small group of individuals, they generated new ways of thinking and highlighted the importance of a collaborative effort for qualitative research. The participants decided to divide a whiteboard in two sections, comparing actions as liking, disliking and commenting by describing how their bodies naturally express those behaviours and feelings in the two different contexts. As a result, it was observed that:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ONLINE WORLD</th>
<th>OFFLINE WORLD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIKING = click of a button</td>
<td>LIKING = movement, sound (body language, speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISLIKING = click of a button</td>
<td>DISLIKING = movement, sound (body language, speaking), silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMENTING = typing</td>
<td>COMMENTING = movement, sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REACTING = no emotional engagement</td>
<td>REACTING = emotional engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECEIVING REACTIONS = emotional engagement</td>
<td>RECEIVING REACTIONS = emotional engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this group session, it was also defined how the act of expressing ourselves on social media is rather mindless, where liking or disliking is viewed as nothing more than some type of currency: if I like your post, I will get something in return (more engagement, more rewards). This type of dynamic might be hard to recognise at first, but it becomes clearer once we dig deeper in the ways in which social media platforms are built on exchanging interactions. In order for a user’s profile to become active and be validated, there is need for engagement with others. This means that for each action there is a correspondent reaction: the more likes you give, the more likes you get. Benjamin Grosser, an American artist who focuses on the cultural, social and political effects of software, effectively describes how:
Engagement with a “like” represents not just a single action, but future potential engagement with a variety of content. In other words, interaction with the “like” leads to more (future) participation.”

What is important to observe, is that the way in which we position ourselves when enjoying something in real life is totally different from the way in which we express it online. In real life, when we feel the need to express enjoyment for something or someone, it is usually due to a high level of emotional engagement. In the same way, we feel the need to express disapproval when something or someone makes us feel particularly bad in a certain situation. Instead, when online, it is easy to click on the like or dislike buttons, for two main reasons:
1) It represents a dynamic for instant gratification[^4], which allow us to create value around ourselves;
2) It is a low-effort type of engagement, where any consequence is easy to avoid and the emotional expense is low or inexistent.

2.2 The reward and instant gratification systems

When we are online, we face a very different environment than the one of face-to-face communication. As previously mentioned, the currency of likes gives value to who we are online and, often, impacts our sense of self-worth in real life. But one thing that is often harder to realise, is that this type of social media currency is carefully designed to build a sense of need among users, which translates into a mechanism for effortless self-validation. We need to become aware of the fact that social media platforms are meant to generate monetary income for those who make them available to us. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and many more, are all companies that constantly seek our engagement in order to allow valuable - in terms of money - interactions. The way in which social media platforms are built is strongly connected to the ability of the users to become part of this economic system and, often without realising it, to cross the thin line that separates marketing strategies and emotional involvement. Social media users are not only given a number of platforms to express themselves and communicate with others, they are also part of an investment that is obscure to many. In the capitalist society in which we live in, we can notice how we tend to prefer instant gratification over long term benefits. We are surrounded by fast foods, fast fashion, online shopping, speed dating. These habits translate into and intersect with the social media environment, where we can put ourselves out there for the world to see and to receive instant validation. But when, for example, something that we post online does not receive positive (or any) reactions from others, we might start to evaluate what the cause could have been and we shape our future decisions accordingly. In Grosser’ words:

“Our need for personal worth is highly dependent on these social interactions, as both relatedness and esteem are necessarily measured in relation to others. If this essential human need can only be fulfilled within the confines of capitalism, then it stands to reason that we are subject to a deeply ingrained desire for more: a state of being where more exchange, more value, or more trade equals more personal worth.”[^5]

My take on instant gratification is that it creates a dynamic for which we rely less and less on patience and therefore we shorten our long term perspective on things. We pick a nutritionally empty ready-to-eat meal over a home-cooked one, or we take painkillers on a daily basis rather than figuring
out why we often suffer from headaches. We are losing our ability to invest time on what matters to our well-being and I would argue that we are losing the ability to listen to our own minds and bodies. This becomes relevant in the context of social media in connection to our psychological well-being when we begin to value our personal worth based on the type of instant gratification we receive online, rather than on what we can invest our time in to develop as individuals. As we do this, we step back not only from the capacity to understand our own selves, but also to be understanding in the context of our society. At the same time, our compromised sense of patience can translate into feelings of anxiety and tension when something is not immediately attainable, which finds explanation in the psychological model of the pleasure principle, which is the driving force that compels human beings to gratify their needs, wants and urges. As well as when it comes to material needs, we might also forget to foster our most important social connections - those with our closest friends and family members - while we instead focus on creating new, weaker ties with strangers online, which represent an essential part to the instant gratification system.

A different outlook on instant gratification is the overwhelming feeling of having too many available choices at hand. In order to make this concept more clear, I will bring to the table a personal example. One day, I was hanging out with some friends and we were discussing what we were going to do at home that evening. Some of us were planning to have dinner and go to bed, some would study, or go to the gym, while I said I would watch a movie on Netflix. This sparked the question “What are you going to watch?” to which I simply answered “I don’t know”. That night I ended up scrolling through movies, documentaries and series, becoming progressively less interested in watching anything at all. When I finally decided what to watch, I realised I spent more time looking for a movie than the duration of the movie itself. That event made me realise how the instant gratification system, where everything is always available at our fingertips, does not necessarily represent efficiency: we might think that it speeds up the process of obtaining something, but we actually passively waste our time while we are overwhelmed by the large amount of possibilities - often even of unsustainable and futile kind! - that we are given.

At the same time, a reward system wants us to feel good about ourselves for making certain choices online and it compliments us for the level of engagement that we show. It is common, when joining social media platforms, to receive rewards - quite often literally in the shape of a cup or a medal - when we engage with others: YouTubers receive “Play Buttons” when they reach a certain amount of subscribers; Facebook users get the opportunity to share their life events on anniversaries with their friends online (usually in the shape of an animation which conveniently reminds them of the interactions that received the highest levels of engagement); and on a more general level, notifications constantly remind us of how good or bad of a social media user we are. Professor Judith Donath, director of the Sociable Media Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Media Lab, states:  

“Social networking provides a series of mini mental rewards that don’t require much effort to receive. These rewards serve as jolts of energy that recharge the compulsion engine, much like the frisson a gambler receives as a new card hits the table. Cumulatively, the effect is potent and hard to resist.”

On this topic, I interviewed a graduating master’s student in Psychology at Linnaeus University - who chose to remain anonymous - who brought to me a very interesting take on how social media users might feel a sense of reward so intensively online that it can actually distract them from practicing effective actions in real life: especially when it comes to users in their teens, there is a tendency for them to look at online engagement as a form of social activism where one’s consciousness is cleared after sharing anything beneficence-related online. Teen users seem to prefer to share a post from, for
example, a non-profit organisation rather than finding ways to actively engage with it, even when it comes to topics that they feel passionate about. In that way, the user feels like their task is accomplished because, by sharing the information, they are letting other users know about a certain need. Even though one may argue that this type of advertising is great to spread awareness about a cause, what would happen if, in the future, nothing more than that will be what a cause would get? What does it mean for a post to be shared thousands of times if no one is willing to make an effort in real life? It is currently only imaginable how this dynamic of delegation might affect younger individuals in their future capacity to engage offline, but I would argue that the sense of reality of things becomes distorted when we are looking at the world through a screen.

2.3 Low-risk confrontation

Although we care about the type of reactions that we receive online and shape our decisions accordingly, we often fail to notice that the way in which we behave in the virtual environment is often superficial and possibly hurtful to others. When we engage online, whether it comes to double tapping the screen of our smartphone to leave a like or engaging in a heated discussion below someone’s post, we are detached from the feeling of being part of an interaction with another human being. In the same way in which we might feel entitled to share negative thoughts online - when we would most probably not do it offline due to a sense of anonymity and personal detachment - we have the ability to abandon any type of confrontation that might arise with the simple click of a button. In a situation in which we give or receive criticism online - whether it is constructive and motivated or not - it is possible for social media users to dismiss that virtual exchange at any moment in time. Dr. Chih Hung Ko from the Kaohsiung Medical University in Taiwan identified a personality factor that was linked to internet addiction called harm avoidance which reflects the idea that some people go out of their way to avoid uncomfortable situations. Dr. Ko and colleagues speculated that the online world is often perceived by adolescents as requiring less responsibility and causing less harm than the real world. At the same time, the impact that negativity and criticism can have on individuals online can be rather strong, which I will discuss more in depth in the following chapter (see section 3.2) where I will be talking about disorder-like behavioural patterns online.

Anonymity plays an important role when it comes to how online users confront each other online, as that is a type of dynamic that can rarely happen when interacting in real life. When I mention the concept of anonymity, I do not only refer to the possibility, on some platforms, to hide one’s identity completely - by using an invented nickname and no profile picture - but to the fact that our body language, as well as that of the other person or people at the other end, is not visible and therefore our level of emotional engagement is reduced. Larry D. Rosen, research psychologist who I will introduce more in depth in the following section, explains that:

“When you are sitting behind a screen, whether it is a computer screen, a tablet screen, or even a small smartphone screen, you cannot see the person at the other end. You may actually feel somewhat anonymous even though the person at the other end might be a good friend. [...] And behind the safety of the screen you feel as though you are free to say whatever you want, however you want, without repercussions.”

This creates a vicious circle in which the ability to engage in low-risk confrontations and the fact that users strongly value other users’ feedback - which translates into the previously mentioned system for validation and instant gratification - allow individuals online to detach themselves from the real state of things and create a double standard between the way in which they act in the
online and offline environments. Yet it is necessary to be aware that this double standard might impact the lives of others, as shown by the fact that, for example, roughly 288,000 posts are deleted globally monthly on Facebook due to hate speech.\(^{[11]}\)

### 3.0 METRICS VS. FEELINGS | Theoretical framework and exploration through design methods

*When the ideas of business, market and profit encounter our social needs, a ground for potential contrast is created. In the context of this project, I researched how we might confuse a system based on numbers to generate monetary profit with a tool to prove one’s self-worth, which might mix with our personal and collective ethics and values in real life.*

In this section I will discuss how important numbers are to social media platforms and how this system of numbers impacts our mental well-being.

#### 3.1 A system of numbers

While analyzing the gap between social media users’ behaviour online and offline from an outside perspective, it became relevant for me to start exploring the field in first person, in an attempt to answer the question: how thin is the line in between these two worlds? In order to do that, I decided to use the design method of bodystorming\(^{[12]}\) in order to place myself directly into my research and experiencing the gap firsthand. The ingredients to my experiment were quite simple: using paper and scissors, I cut out a total of 256 icons - half of which represented likes, while the other half symbolised dislikes - in order to personally hand them out during the course of one full day, according to the positive and negative events I would experience in that time frame.

Fig. 3
What happened as a result, was that the estimation I made of the amount of icons I might have needed turned out to be quite inaccurate, as I ended up handing out only 4 likes and 0 dislikes during the whole experiment. This outcome was then compared to my online experience, where it was about 30 likes and 0 dislikes that I virtually handed out in that same amount of time. Although I currently only use Facebook as a social media platform (the results would have been very different if they were based on my past use of Instagram, where the act of liking pictures and videos is promoted even more), it was very relevant to observe how many times I felt the need to express appreciation while offline. One thing I noticed was that all the likes I handed out were related to human contact, for example after having a very insightful conversation or after experiencing a kind gesture from a friend or a colleague. When it comes to inanimate objects, there was nothing that sparked my interest to the point of sharing my appreciation with myself or with others. Of course this can vary from a day to day situation, but it definitely made me think about how we are subjected to some sort of over-stimulation when we are online. One term that I think can express this type of dynamic is saturation, where the way we express our feelings online is so constant and rapid that it becomes irrelevant to our own emotional response and it allows us to fall into an economy of likes that is actually based on marketing strategies. To put my bodystorming experience into a larger scale perspective, Facebook users have pressed the like button 1.13 trillion times since the launch of the platform. [13]

All of the numbers that I discussed give shape to the concept of metrics online, which is something that is very precious to the economic well-being of any social media environment. The concept of metrics in business represents the parameters or measures of quantitative assessment used for measurement, comparison or to track performance or production [14] which applies to business on social media platforms as well. As Grosser states:

“Facebook is the largest site that depends so heavily on metrics that count social interaction. This is likely because, as a corporation, Facebook’s survival depends on its ability to sell targeted advertising, and those targets are built from the metrics they collect.” [15]

Benjamin Grosser’s project titled Facebook Demetricator was very inspiring for the development of this thesis. It is a free browser extension [16] that is constantly watching Facebook and removing the metrics wherever they occur. Grosser’s observation is that the Facebook interface is filled with numbers, or metrics, that measure and present our social value and activity, enumerating friends, likes, comments, and more. The Facebook Demetricator hides all of these metrics as Grosser is exploring how the user’s experience changes once the focus is no longer on how many friends you have or on how much they like your status, but on who they are and what they say. [17]

In connection to my project, it is relevant to notice that Grosser’s critique goes to the fact that all of these numbers contribute to the user’s desire for more, previously discussed when talking about the capitalist society and the way in which this economic approach has impacted our lives on all levels. Especially when it comes to social media, we are attributing numerical value not to goods for our physical sustainment, but to human connections and social interactions, which is a new type of dynamic in contrast with how individuals have interacted socially for centuries. In relation to how this dynamic impacts the users’ mental well-being, Grosser argues that:

“[...] the metrics also create a more general state of anxiety, as we wait for more “likes,” as we look for more quantitative evidence of acknowledgement from others, and as everything gets old right before our eyes. We are left with a need to escape that anxiety, and the
As I will discuss in the following section, all of the numbers that are visible on our social media platforms, together with the rewards that we receive for allowing these numbers to rise - by engaging with other users more and more - seem to have an effect on our state of mind, where these constant reminders can generate a feeling of anxiety and obsession.

### 3.2 Disorder-like behaviours

One of the tools for quantitative research that I used during my process was an online questionnaire that I shared among students of Linnaeus University, by posting it on dedicated Facebook pages with the intent to reach out to the most active group on social media, users of 18-29 years of age. The questionnaire was built to allow the responders to answer each statement I developed by rating it from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

This survey revealed that most people who responded believed to spend too much time on social media and that their use of these online platforms impacted their mental well-being to a relevant extent, also proven by the fact that most respondents admitted to care and worry about their personal profile and behaviour online.

It is important to notice that the aim of this questionnaire was not to collect specific and empirical data, but rather to observe if there was a shared sense of the impact that social media over-usage has, on an intuitive level among users.

![Social media impacts my mental well being](image)

**Fig. 4**

![I care about how people react to my posts on social media](image)

**Fig. 5**
Have you ever felt your phone ringing or vibrating and taken it out of your pocket only to discover that no one has called, messaged or tried to contact you at all? If you are anything like me, this happens almost everyday and sometimes even multiple times, depending on how much I am feeling stressed, for example, about receiving an important call. This phenomena goes by the name of Phantom Vibration Syndrome (PVS) or Phantom Ringing Syndrome (PRS) and it is nowadays being researched and even possibly linked to occupational burnout by different medical specialists. This syndrome is affecting an increasing portion of the population and I will argue that this phenomenon is linked to the fact that users are always connected to services such as Google Now, among a variety of other available Apps that constantly notify us inducing a constant state of attentiveness and hypervigilance. This alone is a rather small yet relatable example of the type of tangible impact that our technological devices have on our daily lives and our mental health, but many studies are being carried out on whether or not all of this might impact our psyche more severely.

Larry D. Rosen, Professor Emeritus and past department chair of the psychology department at California State University, is a research psychologist with specialties in multitasking, technology use, generational differences, parenting, child and adolescent development, business psychology. In his book *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us* he argues that:

“Our dependence on technology and our inability to be away from it for even a few minutes is just one clear indicator that we are not functioning at our best level. If our minds are always worrying about what we are missing then how can we focus attention on what we are getting?”

Rosen explores in his book how, in the context of social media, there are environmental factors which impact our decision making to an extent to which our online behaviours reflect signs of some of the most widespread mental disorders. This does not mean that all people online are affected by some sort of psychological disorder, but rather that the way in which the previously mentioned dynamics of desire for more, instant gratification and like currency, induce social media users to act according to disorder-like symptoms, which Rosen refers to as iDisorders, or technology induced disorders. Among the examples Rosen discusses there is OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), NPD (Narcissistic Personality Disorder) and more.

For example, many social media users were observed to behave according to narcissistic-like symptoms, as the way in which they share facts about themselves can result in an inflated and not necessarily true version of their real lives. Typical of the pathologically narcissistic individual is a sense of grandiosity and a need for admiration, which help with coping with a fragile self hiding beneath the surface. People affected by NPD also seek constant attention from others in order to obtain non-stop validation of the imagine they let transpire. By looking at these characteristics, you might already notice how this type of conduct can be seen in many of the interactions that we see or perpetuate online on a daily basis. The desire for more puts social media users into a context in which there seems to be no limit to the depth and amount of personal facts that can be shared online. For example, the lack of direct contact with the users positioned at the other end of an online interaction - which could be a close group of well known friends, or a crowd of millions of people - detaches us from the boundaries that we would set to determine what to share or not in real life. In this regard, we always need to remember that social media platforms are built to lead their users to follow certain types of behaviours and that this does not mean that all users are affected by NPD, as Rosen explains that:
But the risk linked to iDisorders, or technology-induced disorders, is not only connected the discrepancy that normally functioning individuals can experience between their online and offline behaviour, they also represent a possible trigger for those who already show a tendency for the development a mental disorder on clinical level. Rosen explains that in the case of users affected by or with tendencies of NPD, they are given infinite possibilities to feed their unhealthy behaviours on social media. For example, a phenomenon called narcissistic injury represents a moment when an individual affected by NPD experiences strong feelings of humiliation when faced with criticism (whether or not it is of a constructive nature due to the unreasonable expectations for special treatment from others), which results into arrogant responses and attitude. As mentioned previously, due to the low-risk type of confrontation that exists online, this is a perfect environment for narcissistic behaviours to flourish without repercussions. And while this can represent an opportunity for narcissistic individuals to sustain their negative behaviour, it also risks to involve other users who might become victims - or unaware perpetrators - of such dynamics. In this vicious loop, social media can become a place for intense negativity and can even affect younger individuals who might not have the ability or the knowledge to defend themselves from this type of adversities, while they might end up suffering emotional wounds due to an unsafe digital environment.

When it comes to technology and obsession with social media Rosen argues that many users might show OCD-like symptoms. For example, many teenagers and young adults might not even consider leaving their houses without making sure that their smartphones are safe in their purses or pockets, and when they happen to forget their devices, they might experience feelings of tension and anxiety. In a similar way, studies demonstrate that they show obsessive behaviours when it comes to checking notifications in connection to the fear of missing out on any type of event. It is important to point out that people who are diagnosed with OCD present more intense and life altering symptoms - for example the creation of rituals (eg: the need to repeat a certain action a specific number of times) which, in the mind of the affected individual, will cause irreparable consequences if not respected (eg: the death of loved ones) - , but nonetheless studies revealed that the obsession with social media can inflict damage to the quality of life of those who are troubled by this contemporary issue. One example lays in our ability to bring our work home during evenings, weekends and even vacations, which lowers the quality of our free time and can impact our physical health negatively in the long run. Brooks Gump at the State University of New York (Oswego) and Karen Matthews at the University of Pittsburgh performed a large-scale study of American men at risk for heart disease and found that those men who vacationed more had fewer risk factors for death."

The influence that social media plays on our mental well-being, which can even result in psychosomatic symptoms, calls for awareness among users. The following chapter attempts to shed light on how, through design practices, a discussion can be raised around more sustainable social approaches.
4.0 BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION: A SPECULATIVE DESIGN APPROACH | Design process and contributions

Shooting a short film has been the most introspective and ideational process of this body of work, as it made me face a number of obstacles that needed to be overcome. Thanks to the help of Johanna Nihlén, who decided to challenge herself and become an actress for one day, and Gabriela Mas, who kindly became my assistant, it became possible for me to give a visual representation to all the theoretical work I generated.

In this section I will introduce you to speculative design, to the importance of film for fictional scenarios and to the plot and underlying message of my short film, Like Me.

4.1 About speculative design

The way in which many people look at design nowadays is often narrowed to the idea of a discipline that develops new objects or products, that are often seen as representation of beauty, function and monetary value. For example, in the context of fashion, we refer to expensive pieces of clothing as “designer items”, a term which symbolises not only the fact that they were created by someone who is perceived as a fashion designer, but also their price and visual appeal. When looking at a new car, kitchenware, or lamp, many will think of the designer as someone who improved the quality or aesthetic of an older product, or added new and innovative functions to it. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, authors of the book Speculative Everything, state:

"When people think of design, most believe it is about problem solving. Even the more expressive forms of design are about solving aesthetic problems." [26.1]

But when we look at design in a broader sense, we will notice that it is a discipline that is always changing and evolving, yet one characteristic that belongs to this field in all of its forms is the way in which it reaches out for the future. Industrial, graphic, interior, interface, web, interaction, system, critical, are all words that highlight different sectors of this same discipline, which aims for the development, creation or improvement of pre-existing concepts - whether they are tangible or intangible objects - to achieve a new, better and more long-term sustainable result.

One branch of design that particularly looks into future scenarios is speculative design, which challenges our contemporary society’s beliefs by constructing alternative realities and by using the power of fiction to invite people to think in new, different ways about present situations. Speculative design also aim to highlight that a more classical, positivist, problem-solving approach might not represent the way to deal with some of the complex challenges that we face today, which in this field are called wicked problems. [26.2] I would argue that the case study of social media obsession and mental well-being is strongly based on speculations due to its contemporary nature; to the speed at which it is changing; and to the fact that it intersects with the incredibly complex elements including our society, our emotions, and future generations.

The speculative field goes hand in hand with the branch of critical design, which proposes an approach to provocation, rather than to the rearrangement of surface features according to the latest fashion while obfuscating the norms and conventions inscribed in the designs and their use. [27] A speculative outlook allows the designer to shape a motive for their audience to stretch their imagination and come to their personal conclusions by using critical ways of thinking. With this acknowledgement, this project wants to contribute to the design field by highlighting the relevance of this approach as a tool for raising awareness about contemporary social discussions.
4.2 Mirrors

In the context of this design project, another particularly important aspect that helped me shape my framework lays in the idea and function of mirrors. Mirrors can be objects to look into; a metaphor for introspective thinking; a representation of who we believe we are, or how we believe we look like; a metaphor for vanity, superficiality and narcissism; a symbol for fragility; a way to look at things from a different perspective; for me, an obstacle turned into an opportunity. My relationship to mirrors in the unfolding process of this project has resembled a collaborative one, in which these objects helped me shape new thoughts and overcome old problems. From a theoretical perspective, mirrors represented for me a type of reflection and introspection that might differ from tangible reality, while they also symbolise the only source of knowledge of oneself in relation to the world. As the gap that separates the online and offline world, mirrors separate who we are from who we want to be seen as. In the same way, when we look into a mirror we rely on the image we see, as we behave accordingly to what we perceive ourselves to be. One of the hardest things to achieve is to be aware of this distortion, or gap, and rather to start thinking and acting upon how to develop our values to reach a real sense of fulfillment.

One example where mirrors are used in speculative narratives is the popular Netflix show Black Mirror, which looks into the future of technology and the impact it might have on our society. Charlie Brooker, creator of the series, also found the concept the reflection of oneself to be essential to his work as, in an interview with Channel 4 on British Television, he stated “[...] any TV, any LCD, any iPhone, any iPad – something like that – if you just stare at it, it looks like a black mirror, and there’s something cold and horrifying about that, and it was such a fitting title for the show.” [28]

During the shooting of Like Me, mirrors became actors to deal with, to position and to take into consideration for any decision. As myself and my camera gear could not appear in any reflection, my storyboard became extremely dependent on what angles and views I would be able to obtain without compromising my “invisibility”. They also became a metaphor for the smart devices that we use in our present scenario, which we interact with in order to only show the best version of ourselves.

4.3 Like Me: a short, speculative film

Films have always represented an effective way to tell fictional stories that go beyond what we know to be real, as they can teleport us into alternative scenarios in the future, in the past, or anything in between. The way in which films bring believable, almost tangible stories into our present lives is a reason for amusement, a source of entertainment and an input for thinking in new ways. With my short film titled Like Me, I am bringing a speculative scenario into the spectator’s device (a smartphone, tablet, smart TV), in order to generate a different type of connection with it. The aim behind this short film is to generate contexts for possible futures of our contemporary obsession with the online world, while using a narrative that is relatable to our current use of technology. The alternative scenario in which the film is framed represents an hyperbole of the present state of things, yet it does not distance too much from the world we live in.

The plot of Like Me sees Johanna, the main character, interacting with her smart mirror. Smart mirrors, in this speculative scenario, are connected to our social media platforms and, thanks to that, users can show themselves online at any given time. In the context of this short film, Johanna live-streams herself everyday, always showing the best, happiest side of her persona. By doing so, the digital and the real connect and intersect, as she is living her life knowing that she is always being watched - and she loves it. But on one particular day, she is playing around with her dog when she makes a silly comment to him, which is picked up by the smart-mirror’s voice recognition function and is posted on the profile of another social media influencer. At this point, for the first time, Johanna starts to receive negative reactions by other users, which quickly turn into forms of threat and pure hate. She quickly
feels overwhelmed by them raging from emotions of confusion, to anger, to sadness and helplessness. As the internet doesn’t forgive or forget, Johanna thinks that her image is forever ruined. But on that same night, when she decides to take a shower before going to bed, she forgets that the mirror in her bathroom is still active and she undresses herself in front of millions of watchers. When in the shower, she hears the sound of notifications going off and enters again a state of panic. When she rushes out, quickly covering herself with a towel, she is faced with reactions and comments in relation to her naked body. Most of these comments are sexual and rather disturbing, but for Johanna anything is better than hate and therefore she feels proud and relieved in this newly found form of online validation.
This short film purposely avoids the use of dialogs, which are replaced with muted scenes in order to represent the distance between online users and the detached perception of one another on social media. In this scenario, users do not care about what other people have to say, they only tune in for the entertainment factor, whether that means to be positive or negative about what they see. The reason why Johanna starts receiving hate online is very superficial and almost comical as, in a real-life situation, it could be explained and resolved very quickly. But in the virtual environment any small thing can become overwhelming, as movements of hate towards someone create amusement among users. Instead, the reason why Johanna stops receiving hate and help her find a new form of validation, goes to represent what type of extreme choices some are willing to make in order to be recognised online.
The visual perspective in this film shifts from inside to outside the mirror and purposely does not show who is located at the other end, dehumanising the users and humanising the technological device (which is now seen as having an entity of its own rather than as the result of collective human input) that stands in front of Johanna as if it was someone who she has known for a very long time. Mirrors become actors and they have their own, different, perspective on the outside world. This type of shifting wants to create contrast between the unsettling and less vibrant perspective of the mirror - or of the dehumanised users at the other end - where sounds are muffled and there is a sense of detachment form Johanna; and the outside view, where the warmer tones and the movements of the handheld camera aim to represent our relatable reality, which sends us back to the current state of things, in contrast to the alternative future where smart mirrors exist in. By alternating the two points of view, the spectator is jumping in and out of two realities that merge into a critique at the way in which we use technology today. The pace of the film is rather fast, as all of the events unfold in the time span of one day, which wants to show how irrelevant our presence online can be and how quickly other people’s opinions in the virtual environment can change, for better or for worse, our sense of selves.

Find the film here: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1cxfz02T1VkbQD7wN1MkF9dCeCCKuIySp

5.0 LIKE ME, LIKE YOU: EMBRACING FUTURES | Results and conclusions

The shooting and editing of my short film also introduced me to new perspectives and helped my project unfolding by analyzing and narrowing down what our present state of things look like in relation to alternative scenarios.

In the following sections I will discuss how social media users seem to show a level of detachment from their own behaviour and that of other people online, while creating links to the short film I made to create a visual connection to my theoretical approach. The aim of this section is to point out who is at stake in the future of social media and how we can embrace possible futures.

5.1 A discrepancy in perception

The survey mentioned in Section 2.2 not only revealed that responders feel that the online environment impact their mental well-being, but also that there seem to be a discrepancy between how they think they act and how they believe other people act in a digital context.

![Bar chart showing the distribution of responses to the question: I think that people behave differently online and offline.](image)
The discrepancy between how users perceive themselves and others online highlights a need for awareness. Social media represent a relatively recent event in our society and many of their effects are still to be framed. But what is certain is that this type of emotion-less communication, together with the possibility to be always connected, have changed our lives on many different levels. In this context, users need to develop knowledge and awareness towards technologies that might look harmless, but hide a potential for a negative societal impact.

It is important to realise that social media platforms give voice and visibility to all users, which inherently means that we have the power to affect online norms. Any positive and negative outcomes of our digital interactions are based on the type of unspoken habits that exist online. We can easily become perpetrators of negativity once our level of awareness is compromised, as it is easy to ignore any type of contrast in the virtual environment. But we also need to think that there are many more generations to come which will be born into a world where social media are already part of every single one of their daily actions and where the desire for more, currency of likes and pleasure principle will not necessarily be discussed for a mindful use of such platforms. Therefore, we can speculate and consider our range of impact and realise that we are all users and creators who can determine the future of social media.

In the short film *Like Me* Johanna is both victim and perpetrator of hate online as, after she starts receiving hateful messages for a very superficial reason, she gets caught into this dynamic and engages with the online rage rather than ignoring a situation that could instead be seen as time wasting. But online it is very easy to give in and quickly shift from the attacked to attacker as Johanna, for example, begins to attack other users on no real knowledge of their personality, ethics or personal background.

### 5.2 Who is at stake

While collecting results from a quantitative perspective with the previously mentioned online survey, I realised the importance of a qualitative approach to the subject. This helped me take into considerations several different factors that come into play when looking at social media as a nearly universal experience determined by people of different ages and cultural backgrounds.

One thing that helped me broaden my view on the way in which social media changed our society, was a series of face-to-face interviews that I conducted with four individuals older than 65 years of age, two Swedish and two Italians. During these interviews, it was brought to my attention that the amount of in-person social interactions that we experience today is not necessarily lower than what they experienced during the past decades, but that what changed is the ability to be constantly available to others, even when it comes to events or needs of minor importance. I also learned that, on average, when older individuals join social media they do it in replacement of older habits, like the one of sending postcards.
to friends and family members, valuing their stronger social ties more than the weaker ones (also by having their profiles set on private mode), in opposition to the newer generations. On top of that, I realised that individuals of older generations had the possibility to make well informed decisions: they were already mature when faced with the possibility to create online profiles and, for example, some of the interviewed people stated that they are not willing to ever join social media platforms, as they are afraid of what the consequences of such choice might be, for example when it comes to their privacy. On the other hand, younger generations quickly entered a society were social media was already being normalised and where the issue of privacy developed a very different meaning very quickly. In this context, I will argue that the issues of over-sharing, hate speech and obsessive behaviour could become consolidated for the upcoming generations online. The anxiety that is generated around being connected at all times is growing stronger and stronger and there is currently little knowledge on what that could mean in the near future. At the same time, it can be noticed how our language is already adjusting to these changes as, for example, Rosen mentions that:

“MTV coined the term FOMO, or “fear of missing out,” to give this feeling a label. The television station polled a large number of young people and found that 66 percent agreed that they find it “exhausting to always be ‘on,’” but, at the same time, 58 percent agreed that “when I’m unplugged, I worry that I’m missing out on something.” [29]

In Like Me, Johanna’s day is available for anyone to watch in real time which is something that, in this alternative scenario, is totally normal. She is looking forward to seeing what other people are doing and to receive validation about what she is showing to the public. Strong and weak social ties play the same role in this scenario because what is important are the numbers that show how many people are interested in engaging with her. When she finally decides to unplug herself from social media, due to the amount of hate she is receiving, her mind is still constantly focused on what might be going on behind the screen of her devices, of which she can almost hear the whispers while she is laying in bed alone. This part of the film wants to represent both the impact that online interactions can have on us offline, but also the fact that social media are so strongly tied to our lives that we are actually never disconnected.

5.3 Highlighting the social impact

In conclusion, the power of social media is to give a voice to all individuals online and to allow us to develop ties and keep in contact with other users across the globe, as Rosen argues that:

“[..., for minimal time and cost, the Internet in general and social networks in particular allow us to correspond with others who share our interests, meet people we would never otherwise meet, download entertaining software such as games, and keep in touch with friends. Psychologically, we benefit: We gain a feeling of status and trendiness, we are taken seriously and listened to, we can manipulate our online profile to suit our needs, and we are allowed to go on and on about interests that our physical family and friends might find very boring.” [30]
It can help develop who we are and who we want to become, but at the same time it can create a loop for a need of validation, even when it is generated by those weaker social ties who’s opinion would not matter in real life, because:

“The way you develop your identity is to put things out there, get feedback, and adjust accordingly. You develop an internal model of yourself and balance this with reactions from other people; this is what Erving Goffman calls, “impression management.” Doing this online allows you to be more reflective earlier about whom you are.” [31]

The process behind this project and the shooting of Like Me covered an important role not only for the development of my theoretical framework - where practical work and research tied together and created inputs for one another thanks to the shift of perspectives -, but also for me to think introspectively and realise my role as a designer, an agent of change and a social media user myself. This became particularly helpful when it comes to understanding the way in which social media impact our lives, as it is something that I could experience and research directly, while forming my own point of view on the subject. The main aim for Like Me is to raise a discussion that goes beyond what we know nowadays, offering a new relatable perspective. The short film aims to help create a new level of awareness to generate a sense of responsibility among social media users, who now can understand the impact that the online environment has on their well-being, while realising the impact that they themselves can have on developing new, improved, ways to be part of this environment.

Just as mirrors became for me an input for new ways of thinking, Like Me wants to generate new perspectives among its audience. Social media represent some of the strongest tools to spread the word about great initiatives, news and projects, but it is also a double-edged sword when not used mindfully. Social media must begin to represent a chance for development rather than a possible obstacle for social sustainability, as we need to focus on the ability to create a more resilient system for our (and others’) mental well-being in relation to technology. Similarly, design needs to aid this perspective shift by making the narratives of technology available to the users who can become active part of this action for societal change.
NOTES


21. Rosen, iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us, 16.


24. Rosen, iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us, 23.

25. Rosen, iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us, 50.


29. Rosen, iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us, 50.

30. Rosen, iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us, 71.

31. Rosen, iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us, 34.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


- Meikle G., Social Media - Communication, sharing and visibility (Routledge, 2016).


TABLE OF FIGURES

- Fig. 1: Concept exploration through graphic design.
- Fig. 2: Illustration of the results obtained during the focus group at Lnu.
- Fig. 3: Physical likes and dislikes used for bodystorming.
- Fig. 4 and 5: Screenshots from online survey.
- Fig. 6 to 9: Screenshots from the short film Like Me with mock-up animations.
- Fig. 10 and 11: Screenshots from online survey.