

Living Through a Lens
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This lyric essay proposes that technology's ubiquitous and seemingly innocuous role in everyday life may be more significant and detrimental than we realize. The essay stitches together song lyrics, anecdotes, and excerpts from articles with the common theme of technology. Bringing these isolated stories and findings together allows readers to make connections between them and gives each one more significance in the context of the others. This piece contributes to the ever-growing conversation surrounding technology, specifically social media, and its effect on people's mental health and everyday lives.

Living Through a Lens

Are we crazy? Living our lives through a lens?-Katy Perry

...

I'm sitting across from my friend at a restaurant. One second her phone is face up on the table. The next it's in her hand. She chuckles and turns her phone so I can see the screen. I scan it, trying to gather the essence of the joke without taking a whole 30 seconds to read every word. I laugh.

Her attention goes back to her phone. Mine to the space between us at the table. There's a fake candle. My friend shows me her phone again. I look. Scan. Laugh. Then, I read the sentence at the bottom and realize that a surprised response would be more appropriate.

"Oh my gosh."

"I know right!"

Her attention goes back to her phone. Mine to the table.

I can't think of anything to say. Even if I could, it wouldn't be worth her precious time.

...

On Tuesday, April 5th, I saw Bon Jovi in concert. The words that resonated with me most didn't come from one of his many anthemic songs. They came during the first time Jon took a break from singing to speak to the crowd: "This is not your phone. This is not your television. This is a Bon Jovi concert."

I joined the many yells of approval.

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So comfortable, we're livin' in a bubble, bubble.

So comfortable, we cannot see the trouble, trouble.

...

I'm listening to my psychology instructor's pre-recorded powerpoint lecture. She is interrupted by a ubiquitous ding. She acknowledges it with an "Oops, sorry," and carries on like nothing happened.

I try to ignore the fact that the ding interrupted her train of thought and my train of thought, but now I can't stop thinking about how she didn't rerecord that section of the lecture but instead kept it in, fully knowing that it would distract us too.

I guess that's life, as they say.

I guess that's li-

...

I'm reading an article that says phone usage has "been linked to excessive dopamine production, which is a similar physiological effect to that of addiction" (Community Access Network, 2020).

Icy fear shoots through my veins. That can't be true. We all use phones every day. They can't be addictive. Why would we have allowed ourselves to use them for so long?

I roll over, satisfied with my rationalization that the article was overexaggerating.

I open Youtube and smile, comforted by people I've never met whose lives only look better than mine.

"Research shows that people who already struggle with facing their emotions in a healthy way may turn to cell phone use as a coping mechanism to block them out or avoid dealing with them" (Community Access Network, 2020).

...

Aren't you lonely up there in Utopia?

Where nothing will ever be enough.

Happily numb.

...

The main TV at my parents' house died. The very next day they shop for a new one. I talk to my mom on Facetime. She's distraught.

"The TV isn't coming until next week. Your dad and I are huddled over the small TV in our bedroom."

I suggest using this as an opportunity to go outside. "It's 50 degrees, you know."

"Yes, I know. I'll read outside, catch up on my library book."

I don't know if she finished her library book in time, but I do know that their new TV is a Smart TV.

...

The darkness consumes me, inside and out. In this moment, I don't know much, but I know one thing. I don't want to go on my phone. It's the one thought running through my mind repeatedly as I lie in bed. It's also the one thing I know I'm going to do. I toss and turn and toss and turn and toss and turn on my phone. I don't want to be on my phone. I want to go to sleep.

But that's the thing with addiction. It doesn't care about your wellbeing. It makes you feel like the only thing that matters in the world is getting a dopamine boost, and my brain knows exactly where to get it.

I wish Jon Bon Jovi had been at my apartment as I was trying to fall asleep. "This is not your phone. This is not your television." This is your life.

...

So put your rose-colored glasses on.

And party on.

...

It's 1:30am. I'm in a B.O.S.S with a friendly driver who insists on making small talk. I muster every ounce of energy I have to reciprocate. She's playing music through Spotify on her phone. She skips song after song.

"These songs aren't even in my playlist. I don't know why they're playing."

"Oh, do you not have Spotify Premium? I don't either-"

"No, I do, it's just being weird."

She then proceeds to tell me that her dad got her Spotify Premium for her birthday last year. After he stopped paying for it, she only lasted a week without it before she caved in and started paying for it herself. She says that before she had Premium, she could just tune out the ads, but now that she's experienced the ad-free luxury of Spotify Premium, there's no going back. She doesn't have the patience anymore.

"Don't get Premium unless you're willing to stick with it forever."

...

My friend and I are watching *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, one of her all-time favorites, she tells me. She has to watch it again because she's writing a paper on it for her radical cinema class. I'm watching it for the second time in my life. I'm just as intrigued and confused as the first time. Suddenly, I hear faint talking coming from my friend's phone. She pauses the movie, turns up her phone volume, and shows me the video she's watching. It's of her friend I met once opening a present from someone I don't know. When the video is done, she plays the movie but her eyes stay glued to the smaller screen.

Later that night, back at home, I check my friend's Snapchat story. I see her usual movie review post that she does after every single movie she watches. In her review, it says the film was "worth every minute."

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*Turn it up, it's your favorite song.
Dance, dance, dance to the distortion.
Turn it up, keep it on repeat,
Stumbling around like a wasted zombie.*

...

I pour myself a bowl of cereal. I open the drawer that holds the kitchen towels. I close it. I open the drawer next to it that holds the silverware.

...

I bring my lotion bottle and clothes into the bathroom. I change and brush my teeth. I bring my dirty clothes back to my room. I go about my day. The next time I go to the bathroom, I find my lotion bottle staring at me from the counter, reminding me that I'm not who I used to be.

...

Yeah, we think we're free.

...

My friends are over for game night. They start talking about an anime show. Shannon, my roommate, says she's been thinking about watching it.

"Do it!" my friend encourages.

They show Shannon a music video with clips from the show. Shannon says now she's definitely going to watch it. She might even start it tonight. She checks the clock. It's 11:30pm.

"Just the first episode," she says.

Amused by her confidence, I nod, remembering the last time I watched a show and how it turned into a binge without my consent.

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From the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*: "There are only two industries that call their customers 'users': illegal drugs and software."- Edward Tufte, professor emeritus of political science, statistics, and computer science at Yale University.

...

We're all chained to the rhythm.



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