Does social media make people happier?

For anthropologists, considering whether something makes people happy is a complicated if not impossible task. Individuals conceive of happiness in widely varying ways, often aligned with broader cultural ideals and value systems associated with class, religion, gender, age, philosophical perspective, educational level and any number of collective characteristics. Beyond these cultural orientations to ‘happiness’, individuals have varying senses of what makes them happy, and even these almost certainly change over time. It is also not at all clear how far we should regard people’s claims to happiness as evidence of how happy they actually are. To frame a question about happiness and social media from an anthropological perspective, therefore, we must consider not only what cultural factors shape happiness, but also how individuals interpret questions about happiness and what discourses of happiness are publically acceptable. For example, we must consider for each cultural context whether happiness refers to instantaneous gratification or life-long satisfaction, to a slight improvement in mood or a deeper sense of self-actualisation. Do people consider happiness to be something that comes from a metaphysical concept such as religion or nature, human relationships or even material goods? Would it be rude to claim to be happy, or would it be rude or ungrateful to claim to be anything other than happy? All of these will profoundly affect individual responses to any question about happiness.

The cultural relativism implicit in the term happiness may explain why anthropologists have historically been reluctant to undertake what could be called ‘happiness research’. This is one of the chapters we have included because we felt a duty to respond to the questions people commonly ask us, as well as to the ones we would like to answer. Yet even
from our perspective some value remains in approaching this subject, particularly in the context of technological change.

Debates about whether modernity might bring more or less happiness date back at least to Rousseau, who argued that civilisation had ushered in a loss of authentic happiness. The notion of happiness is also prominent in the works of Durkheim, James, Weber, Locke and Comte, all of whom contemplated the various ways in which modernity affects notions of happiness and individuality. Yet as Thin argues, the anthropology of the twentieth (and now twenty-first) centuries has been largely silent on the issue, in part because cultural relativism has deterred cross-cultural comparisons.

Instead cross-cultural evaluations of happiness have been the domain of economists such as Sen, who suggest measures of welfare based on Gross Domestic Product should be supplemented with indications such as the Gross National Happiness index or the World Happiness Report. These assessments stress factors such as health, educational attainment and other ‘human development’ indicators, as defined by the United Nations. Such indices follow Maslow in recognising that happiness depends on far more than physiological and safety needs; it encompasses positive and negative emotions, as well as feelings of purpose or meaning in life. Certainly including ‘happiness’ in welfare assessment is preferable to a simple economic measure, but these broad quantitative measures tell us little about local and individual differences in defining happiness.

As anthropologists, studying happiness comparatively through ethnography gives such a question more depth, but also poses the problem of comparing a concept that is defined differently in different contexts. As a starting point we take Thin’s broad definition of happiness which outlines three general senses: motive, evaluation and emotion. In his formulation, motive is related to ambition and perceived purpose of life. Evaluation is related to individuals’ perceptions of their own quality of life as related to cultural values and morality. Emotion is associated with temporary pleasures and more enduring emotional states of well-being. Happiness then includes feelings, expressions and reports of emotions, as well as the important stories that people tell, the relationships that they build and their aesthetic preferences.

Thin’s definition allows not only for cultural variation in concepts of happiness, but also for individual emotion and variation within those concepts. Moral living may be closely associated with religion in one place, while more humanistic goals of education or environmental awareness dominate in another. The ways in which people seek pleasure
may involve aesthetics, sexuality, social relationships, food, festivals and parties, drugs, religious transformation, consumption, adventure or differing combinations of these.

**Studies on social media and happiness**

While anthropology may shy away from such a topic, public debates about the relationship between social media and personal happiness (or more often, unhappiness) are ample, increasingly appearing in high-profile publications. In the last five years, several popular news outlets (including *Time*, *Forbes*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New Yorker* and *The Daily Mirror*) have cited psychological studies suggesting that social media may increase depression, dissatisfaction, jealousy, negative body image and loneliness. These studies attribute negative feelings to a variety of causes. At times users may feel that their contacts ignore them on social media. In different studies users compare their own lives to the images they see of their acquaintances’ lives online. In still other cases people feel depressed because they consider their time on Facebook to be unproductive. Yet other studies critique and contradict these results. Some find that using social networks to chat or make plans increases satisfaction; they may discover a positive correlation between the use of Facebook and increased social capital, trust and civic engagement, and therefore a feeling of gratification in life. Even Facebook conducted its own controversial study, which found that when users were shown posts with more positive words, their posts contained more; when shown posts with fewer of these words, their own posts also contained fewer. Researchers confirmed that the ‘emotional contagion’ of Facebook posts worked just as emotional contagion does offline, where the presence of happy people in one’s life makes an individual happier, while negative people make her or him less content.

The fact that some studies highlight negative emotional consequences of social media while others see potential for positive emotional support may simply reflect the fact that people do very different things on it. In fact a user may have different experiences of social media day to day or even minute by minute. Social media platforms such as Facebook or QQ are not one single thing, but take on different forms depending on the individual user. They may be used for keeping in touch with family, showing off holiday photographs or developing new friendships with banter or emotional support. Obviously, when social media plays symbolically different roles at different times, it does not affect emotions in
a singular and straightforward way. Our problem is that we can continue to assert that asking if social media makes people happier is far too simplistic a question, but we cannot deny that the question’s popularity reveals an overwhelming interest in social media’s impact on people’s emotions. This is true not just of journalism. These questions as to whether social media makes us happy or unhappy, or more generally is good or bad for us, are now entirely standard conversations for people all around the world.

Taking this public interest into account, each of our study’s nine researchers included a question about happiness in their surveys of social media users. The purpose was not to bolster or disprove these other studies’ results, but rather to give a sense of how widely responses differ across multiple geographic locations. Indeed, as Fig. 4.26 demonstrates, answers to the question ‘Does social media make you happier?’ varied significantly depending on location.

Of course, these results should not be over-interpreted. It is possible that people in China feel that positive association with new media is what they are supposed to think, reflecting the Chinese government’s promotion of new media as the vanguard of modernity; as a result they answer overwhelmingly that social media makes them happier. Similarly some individuals in our south India and southeast Turkey field sites may feel that attributing happiness to social media detracts from their position in more traditional value systems associated with the family, caste or tribe, resulting in a relatively higher percentage of people who claim social media makes them less happy. In most of the field sites, the majority of people say that social media has made no difference in their happiness. Relatively few follow the more common reports in the media suggesting various ways in which they have been made unhappy.

By putting these statistics into context and examining concepts of happiness within the individuals’ cultural milieus, we may at least learn something about what is at stake when people make claims regarding happiness – even if ultimately we cannot determine whether social media makes people happy or not.

Capacity and aspiration

Internet access and social media often provide people with increased capacities, whether for learning skills, connecting with new people and ideas or simply attaining a public voice. Yet the connection between new
capacities, increased aspirations and increased happiness based on what Thin calls ‘motive’ is not always clear-cut.

New technology often allows individuals to imagine different kinds of lives, or the ‘capacity to aspire’, which Appadurai argues is a key element in empowerment of the poor. One might therefore assume that if social media provides a gateway to new aspirations, and at times gives greater access to that to which people aspire, it would thereby increase happiness. This correlation is crucial to Wang’s study of Chinese factory workers, most of whom are the type of poor to whom Appadurai refers. These rural migrants turned factory workers often use QQ to represent their fantasies of ‘cool and modern’ lifestyles. As illustrated in Fig. 11.1, female factory workers post photographs of wedding dresses and ‘princess’ fantasies, while males prefer pictures of rock stars, sexy women and fancy sports cars. In each case the images serve as an escape from the drudgery of factory work.

Yet this type of aspiration is not inevitable. In Haynes’s field site in northern Chile, also populated by economic migrants who often think of their city as a marginal, boring and ugly place, Facebook and Instagram are not spaces of fantasy; they rather serve to represent their lives much as they are. In Figs 11.4 and 11.10 we saw the photographs and memes that present their lives within the confines of simple ambitions, closely adhering to the types of normativity displayed by their neighbours. They banish their boredom by posting Instagram photographs of the line to pay their phone bill or of their computer at work, accompanied by hashtags such as #instabored. Even the funny memes of which they are so fond often represent their ambitions as minimal, with pictures of a grave stone marking ‘my desire to study’ or the Kermit the Frog memes of Fig. 11.10.

At first glance the contexts of these two sites seem quite similar, with large populations migrating for new work opportunities. Yet while in industrial China individuals migrate toward the relatively developed and more cosmopolitan areas such as Shanghai, northern Chile is often thought by residents to be ‘only partially incorporated into the nation’, implying that they have moved both physically and symbolically away from the cosmopolitan centre to the periphery. Instead of ambitions related to greater wealth, higher education or wider social networks, the ambitions of northern Chileans revolve around comfort and support for their families. The Chinese have migrated towards the centre and the Chileans have migrated towards the margins, which may explain something of the difference in their aspirations. To return to Appadurai, these two examples suggest that social media’s role in happiness may
have less to do with the capacity for new aspirations than with showing how aspirations reflect the wider social and economic context in which people live.

An example from Spyer’s Brazilian field site makes this even more evident. Spyer uses the term ‘emergent class’ to describe the residents of his field site who have also moved for work opportunities. We have seen how social media is important for representing social mobility. The images of consumption taken at exclusive sites such as the gym or swimming pool, or featuring prestigious brand clothing, reflect in material form individuals’ imagination about their futures and who they dream of becoming. By contrast sharing a photograph near something associated with backwardness, for example an unfinished brick wall, is taboo. Heightened aspirations at times lead to increased pressure to fulfil them, and some individuals fear being seen as those who fall behind in their neighbourhoods as everyone else moves up. Social mobility brings considerable competition among neighbours, colleagues at work or school and even between friends. While residents see these new capacities as advantageous, therefore, they also reminisce about the past as a time of greater fulfilment – an age when everyone knew each other, young people were more respectful, crime and violence were minimal and money was not a daily concern. Although new capacities and new aspirations associated with social media may in some cases lead to the imagination of greater happiness, they may also serve as a catalyst for the new pressures and failures that complicate this narrative.

**Enduring social values**

In each of these cases people associate change with the destruction of values, with alienation and diminished societal ideals. They may then look to social media to strengthen what they perceive as their traditional values and ways of life – vital to the preserving of what they see as the conditions for happiness. In such instances social media may be used not to increase capacities, but to reiterate conventional ideals. For example, in McDonald’s field site in rural China moral cultivation and righteousness is highly valued; it is seen as stemming in part from the area’s Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist history, in addition to its relationships with the modern Chinese state.

Individuals often use social media to propagate a moral life, responding to both their own and the Chinese government’s worries
that new ‘foreign’ technologies such as the internet may be incompatible with moral and right ways of acting, and may have a negative effect on Chinese social values. These rural Chinese people develop online dispositions related not to fantasy but to filial piety, duty, sincerity, wisdom, honesty, correct behaviour and courage, hoping in turn that these will positively influence government and society. The family is central to Confucian morality, and so presenting the self as embedded in family life is important in using social media. The most popular posts are memes glorifying love and marriage, photographs of new-born babies and status messages thanking one’s parents for their devotion and support. Even when messages of filial piety on QZone remain unseen by parents, they are expressions of the idealised version of parental devotion that is performed for others in order to represent the self as a moral person. These popular postings and genres reveal a set of ideals that emphasise the Chinese idiom bao xi, bu bao you (‘share happiness, do not share worries’), thus appropriating social media to reproduce and strengthen existing moral frameworks.

McDonald’s example reflects Miller’s findings in his earlier study in Trinidad, in which he concluded that Facebook was best understood not as a radical space of social change but as a conservative space that strives to effect a return to traditional values of community. This is quite an abstract ideal. A more original use of social media concerns the way in which people actually find ways in practice to deal with the traditional demands of community. While social media may act as an instrument of nostalgia for the sense of community, it may also act as a funnelling mechanism when the demands of actual community are overwhelming. In Sinanan’s ethnography of a Trinidadian town, she notes that people often feel burdened by endless social demands made by their extended family and friends. People often worry that in spending time with one person they may offend six others whose invitations were turned down. Sometimes socialising through social media can complement socialising in person, allowing one’s time to accommodate more social relationships.

In our English field site many individuals discovered that, after reconnecting with past school friends through social media, they were simply reminded why they had not bothered to remain in contact in the first place. Instead they found that social media provided a way to keep these people, who fell somewhere between close friend and distant acquaintance, in a position that was neither too ‘hot’ nor too ‘cold’: the ‘Goldilocks Strategy’. By remaining connected on social media, users were able to give the appearance of being in touch without having to
spend significant time and energy meeting them in person. In such cases social media might be quite successful in reinforcing conventional ideals, whether by providing a space for reiterating traditional values or by providing new mechanisms to alleviate longstanding social conundrums.

In summary, a major factor for most people in their sense of happiness is their relationships with other people. If social media can assist people to manage degrees of scalable sociality through the platforms they use, this may help to keep these balanced and under control. So we have moved from the idea that what matters to people is an abstract relationship with the values of the past to an observation that social media may actually have become an important component in how they deal with these traditional obligations in the present.

Temporary pleasure

While individuals’ aspirations and social values are usually long-lasting structures that affect the details of day-to-day life, people may also experience happiness more fluidly as a temporary form of pleasure. One of the most common discourses about social media in several of our field sites, particularly among young people, is that social media does bring happiness, but only of a fleeting kind. Even as individuals find excitement and pleasure in technologies such as electronic games, music, television and film, so does social media provide a source of entertainment that makes people happy, for a while.

For instance, a young man from our rural China field site described online games to McDonald: ‘When I go up a level I feel incredibly happy. As my points increase more and more, and I gradually move to the top of this level, I will be very happy…but there are no [direct] benefits, only your skill has improved, it doesn’t really mean anything, it’s just an entertainment.’ It is common for young people in China to try to extend their prestige on QQ by adding golden bars and gadgets to their profiles. These prestige icons can be bought using digital money gained simply by remaining logged in and active. In our industrial Chinese field site it was found that some factory workers spend the equivalent of a month’s rent on purchasing digital luxury cars or a ‘noble title on a social media platform such as YY’. Clearly spending such time and money might indicate these individuals are happy in their hours spent online. When one of McDonald’s informants comments, ‘it doesn’t really mean anything’, however, this hedging suggests he enjoys the pleasure that comes
with gaming and social media as an individual, but must also defer to
the larger and more collective cultural discourses which insist that ‘true
happiness’ is more enduring; the transient pleasure of gaming cannot
‘count’ in this larger game of happiness.

Romantic involvement is another source of (sometimes fleeting)
happiness often associated with social media use. In our Brazilian field
site new opportunities for flirting are among the most important advan-
tages of social media. This is positive both for shy people, who are able
to hide their insecurities behind the screen, and for the outgoing, who
are able to access more people and establish less visible channels of com-
munication with the potential for affairs. Spyer writes that Facebook
is seen as a sort of Disneyland for flirting, but most individuals in his
field site depict flirting on social media as a temporary form of pleasure
rather than an attempt to discover lifelong love. These attitudes reflect
the common critique of applications such as Tinder or Grindr as tools
for superficial relationships, dominated by users seeking casual sexual
encounters and one-night stands rather than long-term relationships.
Just as with gaming, individuals may find pleasure in online flirting, but
they almost always describe these activities as superficial and inferior to
more lasting forms of happiness.

At the same time, while there does not yet seem to be any quan-
titative research on the subject, people in many of our field sites sug-
gested that dating applications often do actually lead to long-term
relationships and help individuals overcome all sorts of constraints,
anxieties and barriers to forming relationships offline. Yet dominant
discourses continue to condemn them as tools only for casual and carnal
encounters. This brings us to one of the most important conclusions
of this chapter. We may not learn much about whether social media
brings people happiness. Yet as we examine the details, we are learning
a good deal about conceptions of happiness and the ways in which peo-
ple adhere to these discourses, for instance the denigration of transient
happiness, even while pursuing happiness in ways that are contrary to
popular rhetoric.

Social media and added stress

Even if our survey material lends little credence to the journalistic
emphasis on social media as a source of unhappiness (the numbers
stating social media made them unhappier in Fig. 4.26 are remarkably
small), it is still an important element to this question. While our last
section entirely refutes Tolstoy’s presumption that ‘All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’, we do see as much variation in unhappiness as in happiness.

Social media at times presents a beautified view of life, and this may add pressure for others to keep up. In industrial China, especially among middle-class local residents, ‘knowing each other’s daily life’ may lead to comparisons that make individuals feel inferior. Some people report feeling lonely or depressed while others report increased anxiety, worrying about what others looking at their social media profile will think. In some extreme cases isolation on social media and online bullying may have significant impacts. A factory official, Da Fei, in south China describes being thrown out of a WeChat group by his colleagues as the final straw that led him to quit his job and leave the town. These effects are echoed in some of the bullying found among school peers in the English village site. People have always had the capacity to be spiteful or mean, but social media may well have increased both the capacity and the range of ways in which people can be horrible to each other.

Often people who claim that social media makes them less happy tend to have had some specific bad experience online, for example stalking, harassment or an unfaithful partner. Nicolescu writes that lawyers in his field site in south Italy agree that an increase in divorce is caused by Facebook and mobile phones because partners often discover their significant other cheating through those media. The visibility of Facebook threatens both the romantic couple and the family. As a result many people in the area starting a committed relationship prefer either to close their Facebook accounts or to open a shared account, which is considered the ultimate proof of commitment to the relationship.

McDonald adds that in rural China some women inspect their husband's phones, looking for evidence of infidelity and blaming social media as a threat to marriage. In Trinidad the only difference is that such checking of phones works both ways. Being too visible on social media, or visible in the wrong ways, can carry a risk of others misinterpreting one’s intention and aspersions being cast over one’s morality. Costa reports that women in southeast Turkey also see social media as contributing to an increase in cheating husbands. One of Costa’s first encounters in the field site was with a woman who was crying because her ex-husband had left her to live with a younger woman he met on Facebook. He had taken their children and would not allow his previous partner to see them. For women in Turkey and China, just as for the Italian lawyers, social media is often seen as the root of infidelity – and
thus unhappiness – rather than the medium through which it is manifest. While mobile phones and social media make organising private encounters more discreet, the possibility of photographic evidence of those encounters surfacing makes them more risky. Increased policing of partners was also evident in Brazil and Trinidad, where suspicions of affairs were common, adding to stress for both partners. In all these cases we are reporting a perception of cause rather than any systematic comparison with marital relationships prior to social media, since we were not present at that time. There may actually be no increase in either infidelity or divorce.

What we can say is that the visibility associated with social media has added stress around fears of infidelity, but also contributes to surveillance in other ways. While women in southeast Turkey have gained greater capacities for social relationships as a result of social media, these are also the media through which men increasingly harass them. We also saw in previous chapters the stress that comes from the use of social media for surveillance, both by the state and by society. There is more political control and censorship of Kurdish activities, as well as more social control on an intimate scale carried out by family, acquaintances and friends.

Even in contexts where honour is less of a concern, social media may contribute to stress about how individuals present themselves to others. For example, in Nicolescu’s study in Italy, he found that individuals (in particular adult women) experience a burden to create a certain kind of positive image in public. This lies at the core of local social values and precedes the development of social media, but social media becomes a new space in which this pressure is felt. Women have long considered it necessary to dress well when leaving the house, even if only to run errands, and they now feel pressure to craft their self-presentation carefully when uploading photographs or even writing status updates. Just as these women feel a responsibility to represent an Italian ideal of beauty and elegance through their Facebook posts, the educated elite feel they must display their intellectual or artistic credentials online in order to sustain their social prestige.

In each of these cases social media creates a space for both displaying and reconstituting cultural capital in a setting in which people feel that they should have a public presence that corresponds to their social position. However, this is often felt to be an obligation rather than an opportunity. A general increase in visibility provides not only opportunity, however, but also anxiety and a burden – at least comparable to worrying about what to wear in public.
**Discussion: does social media make people look happier?**

One result of this pressure to look appropriate online was noted by Venkatraman in his south Indian field site. He observes that people always seem happy on Facebook, just as they report pressure to appear happy whenever in public. With happy pictures, positive messages and even frustrations expressed as jokes, happiness is not in this instance the by-product of other aspirations: it is the very object of aspiration itself. Given a context in which multiple media provide options for different kinds of communication, private conversations through Facebook messenger, WhatsApp or other forms of dyadic messages may carry more information about ‘authentic’ emotional states, while more public Tweets and Facebook status updates are places in which individuals are more likely to ‘perform’ happiness in order to craft a particular view of their lives for their presumed audience. In India happiness is the social value, and as public forms of social media proliferate they simply become new spaces to express an appearance of happiness.

Social media may be a place to reconnect or to feel overly connected. It may be a place to express true happiness or to put on a deceptively smiling face for the public. Perhaps this duality is why so many people responded that social media makes no difference to their happiness (an average of 56.68 per cent across all nine field sites). So even if we acknowledge problems in defining happiness, there is some benefit to the question posed by this chapter because social media has created a huge additional space within which people present and represent happiness and emotions. We have also seen how this space regulates the balance between visual display, increased access to information, the associated development of aspiration and in some cases, for instance in industrial China, the possibilities of fulfilment of those aspirations. So the value of asking whether social media has an impact on happiness may not be learning whether people are happier because of social media. Rather it is in learning how we can use social media to understand more about what happiness means to its users, and how and where they express this.