Instagram & Mental Health
An exploration of users trapped by systemic pressures

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What is the relationship between Instagram and mental health?

Instagram is a popular and fast growing social media platform. There has been extensive research conducted around the globe to study the linkages between Instagram use and its effect on the user's mental health. Some research has linked unhealthy Instagram use to feelings of depression, anxiety, and inadequacy, and may lead to increased stress and sleep disorders.

What makes Instagram different?

Distinct from other social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter, Instagram content is entirely images. Images have higher emotional appeal, and are more addictive. These videos and stills lead to users making unrealistic comparisons between themselves and other users who may present an idealized version of themselves online. The platform is being increasingly used by companies, brands, and celebrities to gain huge digital followings.

Who uses Instagram?

There are 1 Billion people that use Instagram every month and 63% of users login at least once per day. Making Instagram more popular than Facebook and Twitter among young people. There is an almost even divide between female and male users, 52% and 48% respectively.
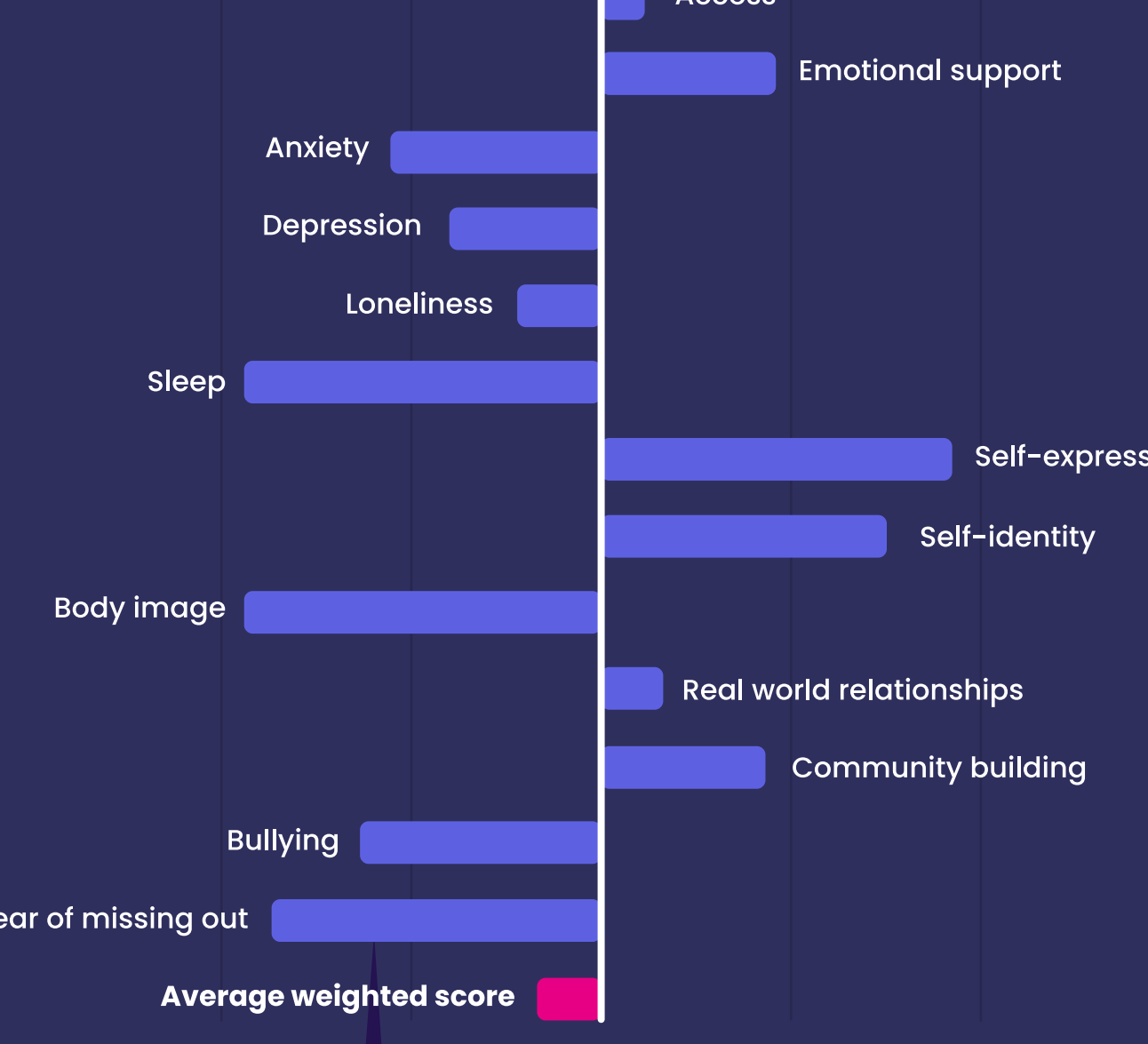
Who is most vulnerable?

The risks of a user experiencing some mental health distress from using social media increases among vulnerable populations. These populations include children and youth, individuals with a debilitating mental health condition, victims of traumatic events or crisis, and Individuals who are economically disadvantaged.

Instagram's effect on young people's mental health
Source: Royal Society for Public Health, #StatusofMind, May 2017

Net Negative ← → Net Positive

- Awareness
- Access
- Emotional support
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Sleep
- Self-expression
- Self-identity
- Body image
- Real world relationships
- Community building
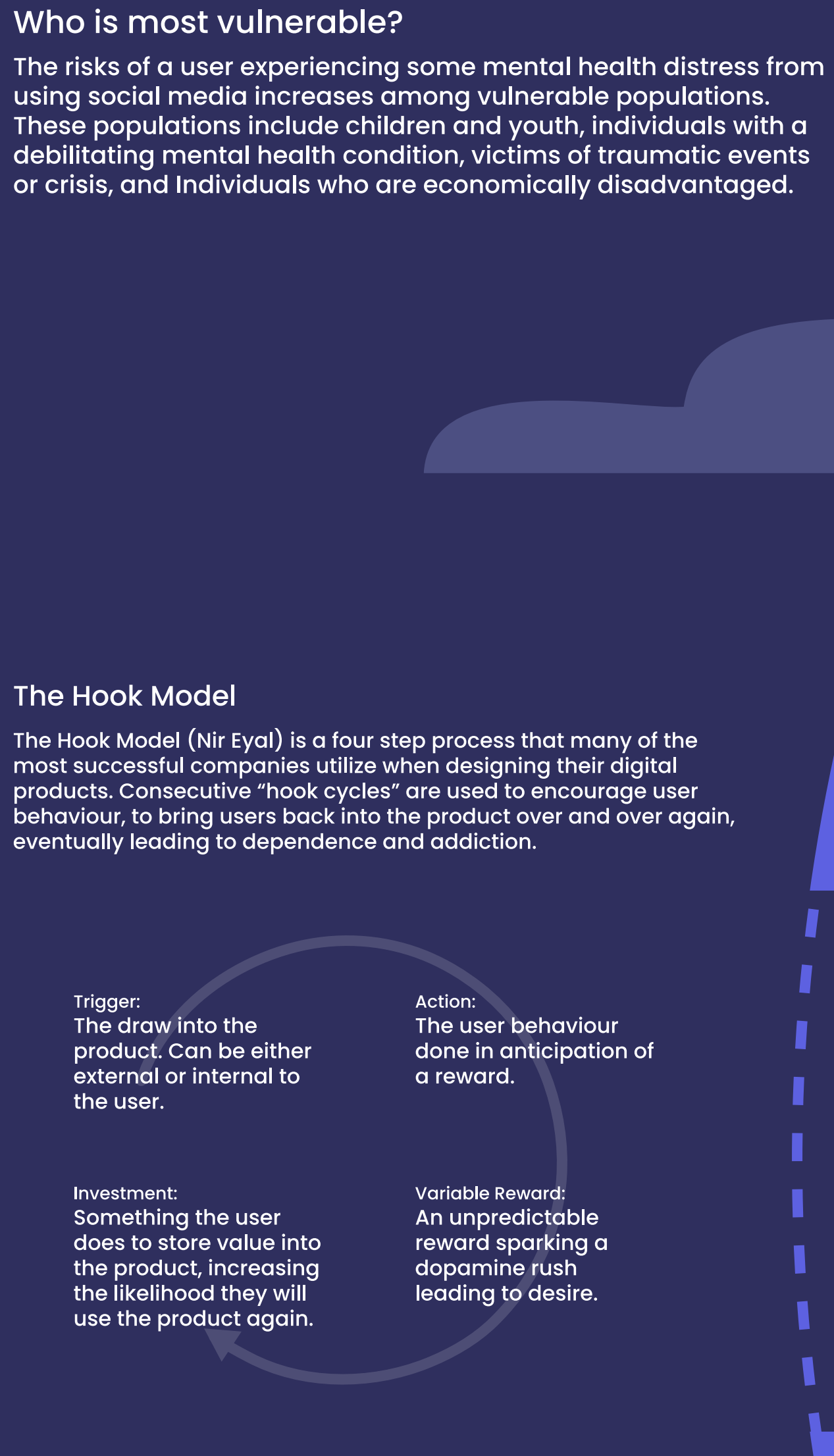- Bullying
- Fear of missing out
- **Average weighted score**

Comparison of social media platforms on young people's mental health
Source: Royal Society for Public Health, #StatusofMind, May 2017

↑ Net Positive
↓ Net Negative

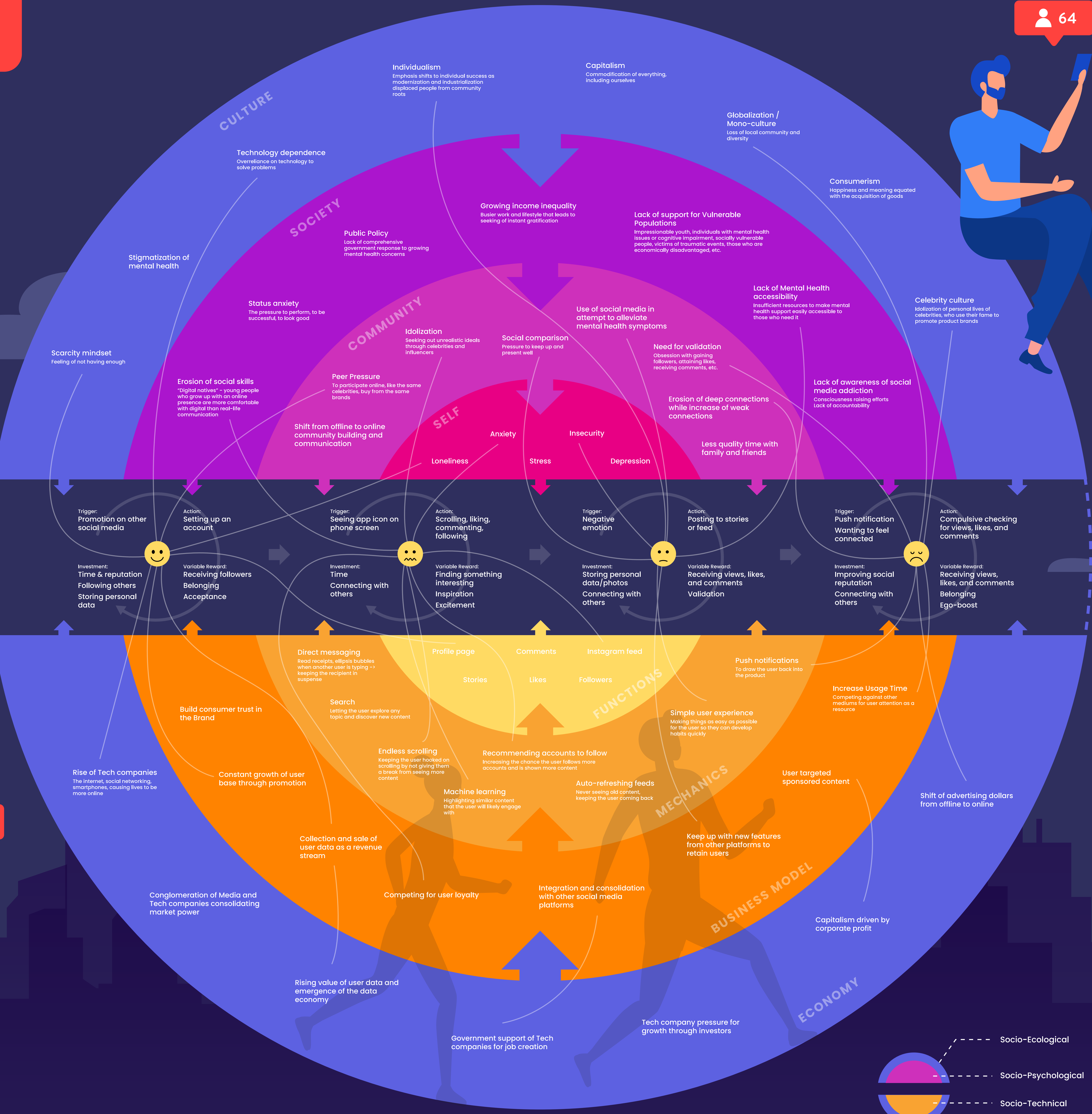Snapchat · Twitter · YouTube · Facebook · Instagram
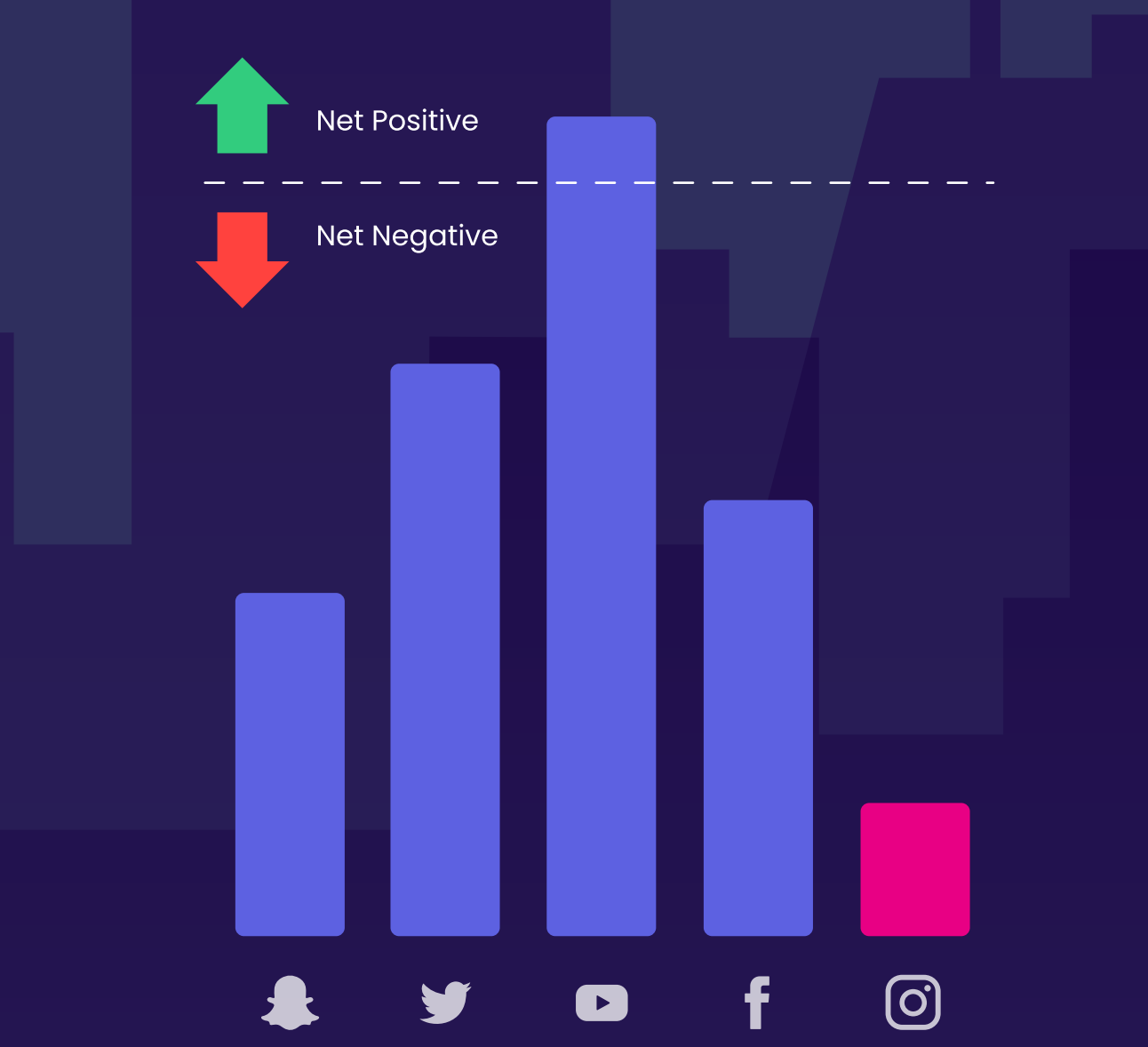
The Hook Model

The Hook Model (Nir Eyal) is a four step process that many of the most successful companies utilize when designing their digital products. Consecutive "hook cycles" are used to encourage user behaviour, to bring users back into the product over and over again, eventually leading to dependence and addiction.

Trigger: The draw into the product. Can be either external or internal to the user.

Action: The user behaviour done in anticipation of a reward.

Investment: Something the user does to store value in the product, increasing the likelihood they will use the product again.

Variable Reward: An unpredictable reward sparking a dopamine rush leading to desire.

As the user moves through the hook cycles of Instagram, they become more and more addicted to the product. The more addicted the user becomes, the more likely the user will experience negative effects on their mental health.

CULTURE

Individualism — Emphasis shifts to individual success as modernization and industrialization displaced people from community roots

Capitalism — Commodification of everything, including ourselves

Globalization / Mono-culture — Loss of local community and diversity

SOCIETY

Technology dependence — Overreliance on technology to solve problems

Growing income inequality — Busier work and lifestyle that leads to seeking of instant gratification

Consumerism — Happiness and meaning equated with the acquisition of goods

Lack of support for Vulnerable Populations — Impressionable youth, individuals with mental health issues or cognitive impairment, socially vulnerable people, victims of traumatic events, those who are economically disadvantaged, etc.

Stigmatization of mental health

Public Policy — Lack of comprehensive government response to growing mental health concerns

Lack of Mental Health accessibility — Insufficient resources to make mental health support easily accessible to those who need it

Celebrity culture — Idolization of personal lives of celebrities, who use their fame to promote product brands

COMMUNITY

Status anxiety — The pressure to perform, to be successful, to look good

Idolization — Seeking out unrealistic ideals through celebrities and influencers

Social comparison — Pressure to keep up and present well

Use of social media in attempt to alleviate mental health symptoms

Scarcity mindset — Feeling of not having enough

Erosion of social skills — "Digital natives" – young people who grow up with an online presence are more comfortable with digital than real-life communication

Peer Pressure — To participate online, like the same celebrities, buy from the same brands

Need for validation — Obsession with gaining followers, attaining likes, receiving comments, etc.

Lack of awareness of social media addiction — Consciousness raising efforts Lack of accountability

Erosion of deep connections while increase of weak connections

Shift from offline to online community building and communication

Less quality time with family and friends

SELF

- Anxiety
- Insecurity
- Loneliness
- Stress
- Depression

The Hook Model (cycle)

Trigger: Promotion on other social media
Action: Setting up an account
Investment: Time & reputation / Following others / Storing personal data
Variable Reward: Receiving followers / Belonging / Acceptance

Trigger: Seeing app icon on phone screen
Action: Scrolling, liking, commenting, following
Investment: Time / Connecting with others
Variable Reward: Finding something interesting / Inspiration / Excitement

Trigger: Negative emotion
Action: Posting to stories or feed
Investment: Storing personal data/photos / Connecting with others
Variable Reward: Receiving views, likes, and comments / Validation

Trigger: Push notification Wanting to feel connected
Action: Compulsive checking for views, likes, and comments
Investment: Improving social reputation / Connecting with others
Variable Reward: Receiving views, likes, and comments / Belonging / Ego-boost

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FUNCTIONS

- Direct messaging — Read receipts, ellipsis bubbles when another user is typing — keeping the recipient in suspense
- Profile page
- Comments
- Instagram feed
- Stories
- Likes
- Followers
- Push notifications — To draw the user back into the product
- Search — Letting the user explore any topic and discover new content
- Increase Usage Time — Competing against other mediums for user attention as a resource
- Simple user experience — Making things as easy as possible for the user so they can develop habits quickly

MECHANICS

- Build consumer trust in the Brand
- Endless scrolling — Keeping the user hooked on scrolling by not giving them a break from seeing more content
- Recommending accounts to follow — Increasing the chance the user follows more accounts and is shown more content
- Machine learning — Highlighting similar content that the user will likely engage with
- Auto-refreshing feeds — Never seeing old content, keeping the user coming back
- User targeted sponsored content
- Rise of Tech companies — The internet, social networking, smartphones, causing lives to be more online
- Constant growth of user base through promotion
- Collection and sale of user data as a revenue stream
- Keep up with new features from other platforms to retain users

BUSINESS MODEL

- Conglomeration of Media and Tech companies consolidating market power
- Competing for user loyalty
- Integration and consolidation with other social media platforms
- Shift of advertising dollars from offline to online
- Capitalism driven by corporate profit

ECONOMY

- Rising value of user data and emergence of the data economy
- Government support of Tech companies for job creation
- Tech company pressure for growth through investors

Legend
- Socio-Ecological
- Socio-Psychological
- Socio-Technical
- Socio-Ecological

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Socio-Ecological System

Within the synthesis map the socio-ecological system acts as a supra-system. Nested within it are the socio-psychological and socio-technical systems and their various layers. There is a division between culture and economy, and these two layers mirror each other on the top and bottom of the wheel. The environmental context of Instagram itself is shifting as a result of rapid technological change, and therefore the relevance of the split is to emphasize not only that Instagram and its environment relate both at an economic and cultural level, but also that turbulence may be felt incongruently between these layers.

A common throughput is articulated by several hooked loops which pass through the centre, reorienting the observer back to the user. The entire wheel is veined with tenuous threads of connection that serve to demonstrate a layering of interdependant relations between levels.

Socio-Psychological System

The pressures of hyperconnectivity and self-presentation have given rise to a climate in which one's sense of self can be determined by the perceptions of others. This is nowhere more apparent than on platforms such as Instagram where simultaneously, psychological forces are directed towards the social field and social forces are directed towards the psychological field. As a result, manifestations of maladaptive behaviours emerge such as addiction and poor mental health outcomes. By exploring the impact of Instagram on the self we reveal how responses are experienced as undesirable within the community layer.

The bar graphs showcase the broader social media ecosystem, and that within the media ecology Instagram distinguishes itself as unique because of its image based content and negative effects.

Socio-Technical System

The socio-technical system layers articulate the connection between actions, process, and functions. This system considers how user activities and functions are influenced by software mechanics, as well as how technology can be used to manipulate behaviour in a way that impacts mental health outcomes. At the business model layer, the application of Instagram's technical design is informed by profit motivations and the larger business context, which links to the economy layer of the socio-ecological system.

The visual pattern language of Instagram is used throughout the synthesis map to frame the systems. Causal loops are housed within the gesture of an infinite scroll. And emoji's are used to indicate disposition within the hooked loops, this modern hieroglyphic style of communication is a familiar vernacular to Instagram users.