How digital algorithms are failing consumers – and what marketers can do about it

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A survey by Vox, the media company, and SightX, the research-software provider, identified a major gap between the current digital experience and consumers' ideal online environment.

- Digital platforms are good at fulfilling needs based around entertainment and information, but generally fall short when it comes to meeting deeper human needs.
- Consumers gave today's digital experience a score of six out of ten, indicating that it falls short of expectations.
- Fostering tangible human connections, while also empowering individuals, should be a critical goal of digital platforms.

Why it matters

Algorithms are critical drivers in shaping the digital experience, from the content users see on Facebook and Instagram to the recommendations they receive on YouTube. But these automated systems usually focus on attracting and retaining attention, and not on helping consumers become the best versions of themselves.

Takeaways

- As digital platforms generally seek to maximize dwell time among users, they often focus on stirring anger or division rather than fostering more positive emotions.
- The negative environment on social media is harmful for brands, as it increases the likelihood of ads appearing next to undesirable content.
- Rebuilding digital environments so they take human elements into account could benefit advertisers and consumers alike.

Consumers are not happy with their online lives, even as platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube continually seek to tailor digital experiences to meet the granular preferences of each user.

The source of this insight was a representative poll of 4,000 connected consumers by publisher Vox and market-research software provider SightX. And their survey revealed the systems and technologies which optimize a user's social-media feeds and content recommendations are performing well in terms of entertainment and information. But they fall short with regard to fulfilling much deeper needs.

"What's interesting is that the algorithms are honestly delivering what we're supposed to want right now: humor, curiosity, maybe creativity," Edwin Wong, Vox Media's svp/insights and innovation, during a session at the 2020 Virtual Asian Marketing Summit, a conference held by the Asian American Advertising Federation (3AF).

"But what's missing is … the best of humanity that's not in our algorithms."

At a time when brands are expressing concern about hate speech and online misinformation – as shown by a Facebook boycott earlier this year, and countless purpose-driven marketing efforts that address social division – Wong argued they should also encourage a rethink in algorithms that focus solely on capturing and retaining attention, and not on reinforcing positive habits.

"We need to, as marketers, start to build on a larger mission that challenges the status quo of our Feed," he said. "Are we going to challenge how, and why, many platforms leverage emotions to elicit responses of anger and disgust? Should we incentivize that – or demand introspection and reorientation?"

## Moving digital algorithms from a focus on "me" to an emphasis on "we"

When asking people about the online lives they would "like the most" versus what their "experience is like today", Vox found that "humor", "curiosity" and "gratitude" appeared on both lists. Digital platforms, it discovered, are also well-tuned in terms of matching a desire for "creativity", "learning" and "enthusiasm".

But they are not cultivating values such as "fairness", "appreciation of beauty and excellence" or gaining a wider "perspective" on the world. And this shortcoming, for Wong, reflects the fact social-media services have not always assisted users in becoming well-rounded people.

"It's not the pet videos; it's not about watching other people's goodness," he said in describing this missing piece of the puzzle. "It's really activating my own goodness."

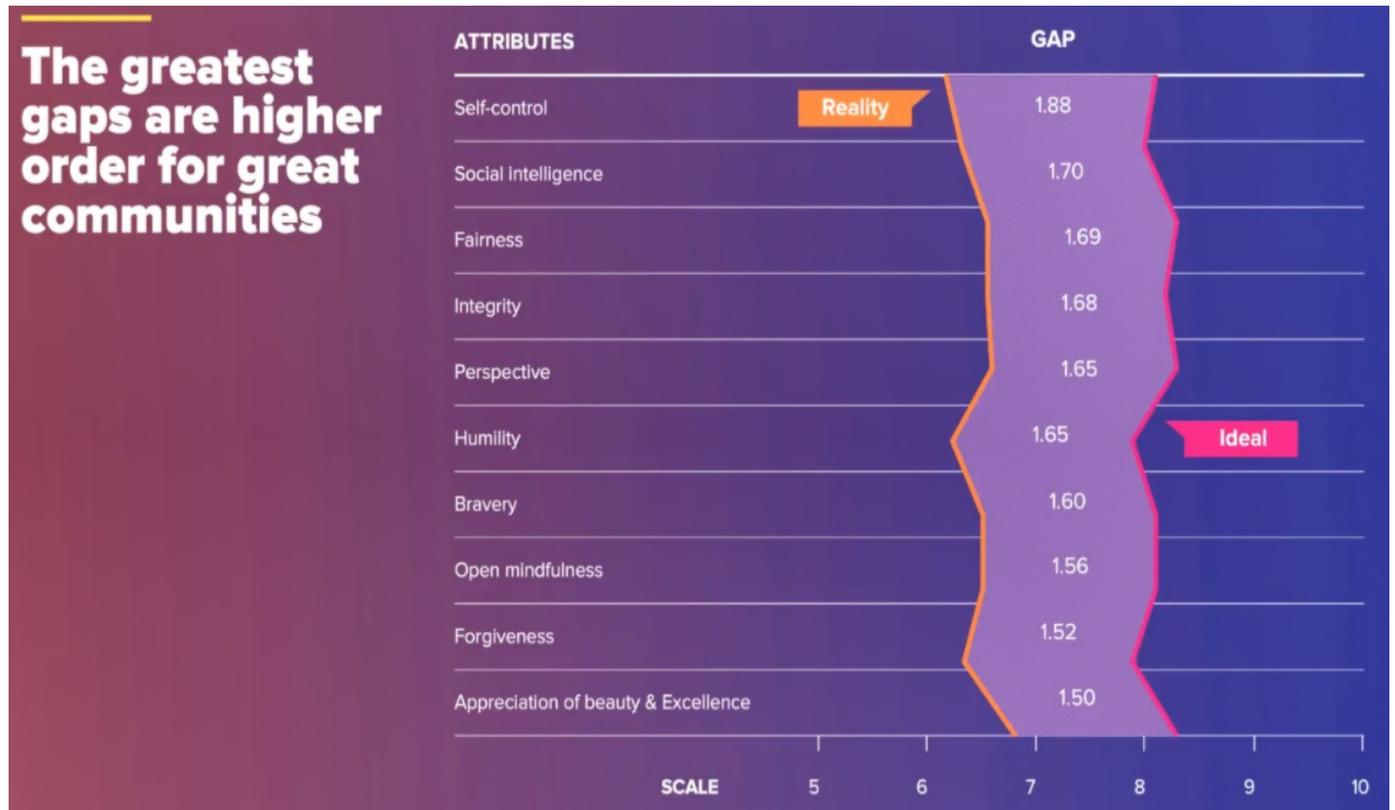| WHAT I'D LIKE THE MOST	WHAT MY EXPERIENCE IS LIKE TODAY
Appreciation of beauty & Excellence	Humor
Humor	Curiosity
Curiosity	Creativity
Fairness	Love of learning
Perspective	Gratitude
Gratitude	Enthusiasm

Underpinning Vox's framework is a "wheel of positivity" developed by Martin Seligman, director of the Penn Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. His schematic – based on analysis spanning several millennia, and from ancient China, India, Greece and Rome to contemporary cultures – incorporates six "virtues", and 24 related character strengths, which can be associated with living well:
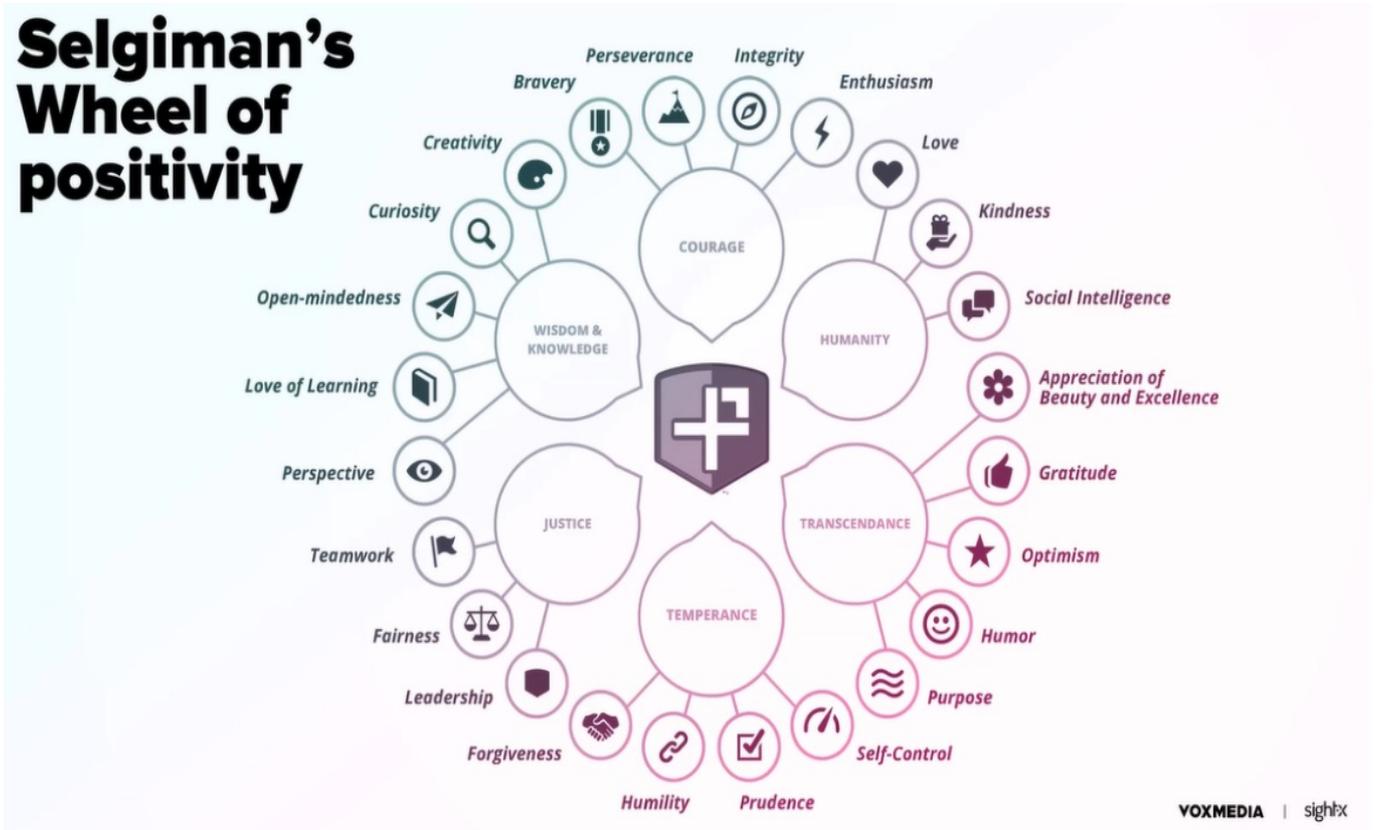
Vox and SightX highlighted these attributes when questioning their survey panel about today's digital experience, and how contributors would like it to evolve over the next decade. "And what we found is that most people want all 24 of these attributes, with a standard deviation of roughly two," Wong said.

In further quantifying this insight, Vox placed each of the 24 attributes on a one-to-ten-point spectrum to build a perspective of how consumers would prefer the digital world, and the current state of play in the online world.

"When you take a look at where we see the greatest gaps," noted Wong, the greatest points of difference involve values that run much deeper than the desire to see a humorous video, fill an immediate knowledge gap, or feel a burst of affirming positivity – and that also relate to the most basic, but most important, human principles.


The greatest gaps are higher order for great communities

ATTRIBUTES	GAP
Self-control	1.88
Social intelligence	1.70
Fairness	1.69
Integrity	1.68
Perspective	1.65
Humility	1.65
Bravery	1.60
Open mindfulness	1.56
Forgiveness	1.52
Appreciation of beauty & Excellence	1.50

SCALE 5 6 7 8 9 10

"There's literally a 25% difference in things that we teach our children to be" and the digital reality we face as adults, he added.

In laddering up the ratings for the 24 attributes to create an overall assessment for how consumers view their online lives, he reported that the survey participants landed on "an average mean score of six, with an average deviation of three," said Wong.

"Put in another way, we are looking for a B+ to a B- ideal digital life. But we're literally getting a C [grade for our] digital diet, with a variability that might actually get us an F."

We consistently want the same ideal things with real life having greater variability

IDEAL

1 _____ 10

REAL

1 _____ 10

F   D   C   B   A
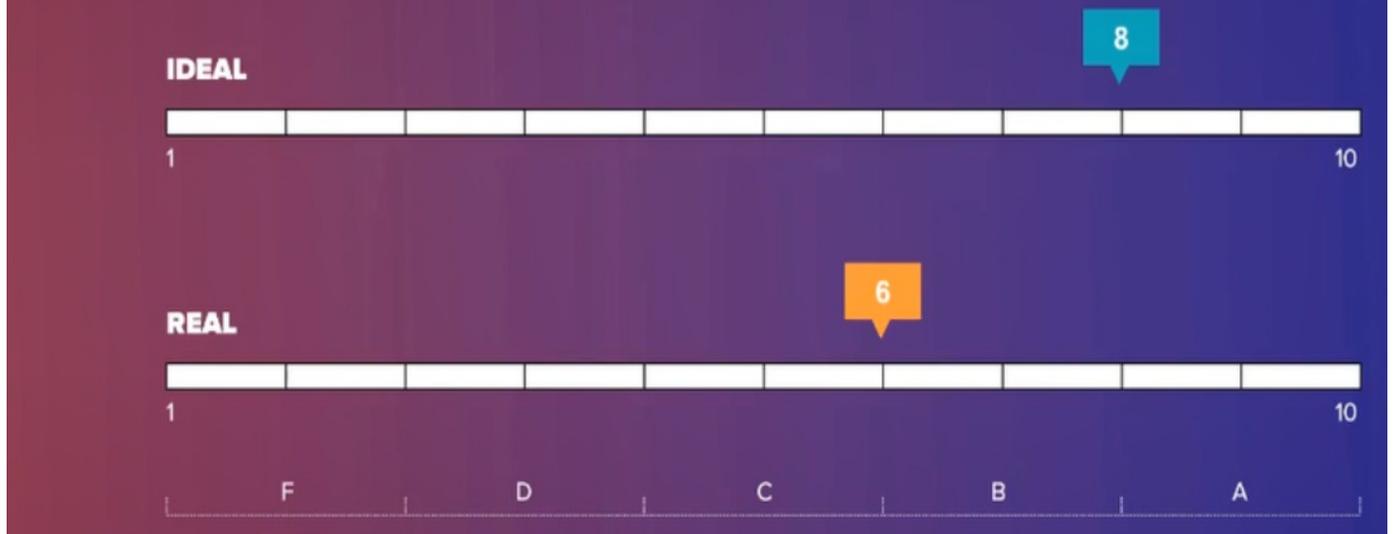
Platforms need to cultivate values like self-control, self intelligence and integrity

To remedy this situation, it will be vital to foster human togetherness while also empowering individuals.

"We want digital lives that help us with our self-control, social intelligence, fairness, integrity," said Wong. "The fact is the current digital experience is doing a good job creating the 'fun me', not necessarily the 'good version of me,'" said Wong.

"It's clear that we probably all want – and need – a digital life that helps us get that self-control back. And the digital communities that we're creating lack this regulation. And we need to move from a 'web of me' to a 'web of we.'"

The advent of social media, the Vox insights chief reminded the 3AF assembly, was initially premised on spreading word of mouth and connecting people "all of us to take advantage of these relationships at scale." Over time, these virtual hubs have grown into attention magnets, often by tapping into anger and division rather than more noble human traits.

And that approach has never been more exposed than in the present moment of social disruption, when people – and, indeed, entire societies – are striving to address difficult questions. "How are we going to help each other through systematic racism, not just against blacks, but against Asians? How are we going to move through COVID-19?" Wong asked in summarizing these issues.

Instead of the feeling of hopelessness that can be fostered when scrolling through social media, he suggested

that new models should prioritize "self-determination" – a concept that is centered on three tiers:

- **Autonomy,** such as freedom of expression and unencumbered decision-making, areas where digital platforms typically succeed, albeit with an underlying layer of social "pressure".
- **Competency,** summed up as feeling capable of performing tasks. And the internet is an unrivalled resource for fixing, say, basic household or mechanical issues using instructional content like YouTube videos.

  "At the same time, it doesn't actually create that 'capable confidence,'" said Wong. "Capabilities don't actually equal confidence. And what I mean by that is that when we take a look at how capable I am, I'm not confident in myself when I have to feel jealousy about how great the lives of my friends are" based on the idealized content that appears online.
- **Relatedness**, where digital performs well in terms of connecting users with the people they love, but struggles when it comes to making people feel truly "cared for," Wong said.

  "From a connection perspective, yes, it helps me find people that I want to connect with from a niche perspective, I want to be around. However, when you take a look at it again, it doesn't necessarily translate for feeling cared for," he added.

  "The current connected [world] actually leaves us quite lonely, and individually naked, and kind of broken … It doesn't actually get us to where we need to go, which is consensus and agency around some of the biggest themes that need solving right now."

The connection between these three areas can be summed up using the word "agency", a notion that is grounded in a fundamentally different principle than many digital platforms' emphasis on click-and-scroll dopamine rushes.

"Agency theory is an important thing, because it creates intrinsic motivation as opposed to extrinsic reward," said Wong.

The former motivation is winning out at present - and only by including the latter can true progress be made. "We are currently looking at our digital diets to maximize creativity, self [and] 'me'. But it does little for the 'we'. Are we seeking experiences that create fairness, appreciation and perspective for the good of our communities?" Wong said in framing the problem.

His answer: "Agency and activation are paramount for higher levels of life and community satisfaction … And while the [financial] responsibility is to our shareholders, the larger moral context is responsibility to one another.

"Are we willing to come together and start to rebuild this life as we know it, and break the algorithms, and rebuild it together again?"

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