Over the past few years, engagement with and cultural perceptions of social media have swung towards cynicism, fueling everything from inauthentic ideals to dangerous misinformation to mental health concerns.

As users increasingly chafed against the shallow, artificial and unhealthy ‘Instagram aesthetic,’ recent months saw the beginnings of a reversal, with platforms taking steps to create intimate and sheltered safe havens. Now, quarantine and social distancing have contributed a final push in the evolution of social media, taking it from a public stage where users went to show off the shiniest parts of their life into an outlet for deep, genuine human connection.

At a time when digital intermediaries are the safest options for interpersonal interactions, social media usage is skyrocketing.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, 70% of consumers around the world are spending more time on their smartphones, with nearly half (44%) spending more time on social media specifically, according to March 2020 findings from Global Web Index. Platform traffic confirms this: Facebook data shows that, as of March 24, 2020, time spent in group calls increased by over 1,000%, messaging rose by 50% and Instagram and Facebook Live views doubled in just one week; TikTok downloads rose 27% in the first 23 days of March 2020, bringing the total number of downloads to 1.9 billion; video chat app Houseparty was downloaded 2 million times during the week of March 15, 2020 alone; and Snapchat reported a 50% increase in video calls between February and March 2020.
Facebook introduced a new desktop app for group video calls on April 2, 2020.

“Social media is having a moment right now,” Meredith Chase, Chief Strategy Officer at Wunderman Thompson, tells Wunderman Thompson Intelligence. “It is being leveraged and used for what I think all of our initial aspirations were for social media: to create human connection.” While that initial intent had gotten lost over the last several years, Chase observes, “now, as people are socially isolated, it is truly serving as a tool for creating real, authentic human connection…people are coming together in a way that we have not seen before, and social is a huge part of what’s driving that.”

Part of coming together means acknowledging the full spectrum of the human experience—and alongside the uptick in usage is a surge in sincere and open discussion. “People are having more honest conversations about taking care of oneself and acknowledging the communal stress that we’re all under,” Chase explains, citing statistics from Crimson-Hexagon that show weekly mentions of job losses, layoffs and unemployment are more than five times higher in March 2020 than they were in January 2020.

The Social Distance Project, a new Instagram project launched on March 18, 2020, is a great example of this: a cross between a digital diary and a virtual confessional, the account publishes anonymous submissions that document the daily tribulations and everyday drama of life under lockdown. The initiative leverages social media in an effort to humanize the pandemic. “I’d really been thinking about how this will have such a profound effect on people’s personal lives, and that isn’t being talked about in the news because there are more important things going on on the macro scale,” The Social Distance
Project creator Meg Zukin told The Guardian. “But if you break up with a partner during this – or because of this – that’s still a major life adjustment.”

Even before the coronavirus outbreak, social media was evolving into a space to broach heavier topics, with users taking to TikTok to critique mental health services, raise awareness of Islamophobia and campaign for public office. In the midst of newly isolated lifestyles, this willingness to address serious issues on social media seems to be accelerating. Snapchat launched mental health tool Here For You on March 20, 2020—moving up the original April release date in response to COVID-19 and expanding resources to address the pandemic. People around the world are using TikTok as a platform to mobilize a global rent strike in light of massive coronavirus layoffs. And doctors are using Twitter and TikTok to spread news and share information about COVID-19.

![Main image courtesy of Houseparty](https://intelligence.wundermanthompson.com)

In this brave new world, social media is being legitimized as a platform for addressing vulnerable topics, effecting real change and offering a source for professional counsel. While the topics of discussion may not always be uplifting, the emerging pattern of engagement on social platforms is, on the whole, an optimistic one. “It’s helping to bring hope to humanity,” says Chase. "People are showing that they are ready, willing and hungry to find a way to bring us together collectively."

*Main image courtesy of Houseparty*

**Social media metamorphosis**

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