

*'The Eyes of other People are the Eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine Houses nor Fine Furniture.'* Letter to Benjamin Vaughan, 1784.

It is the sign of a truly formidable, forward-thinking mind that their messages remain relevant centuries after their death - and on this basis, Benjamin Franklin was a truly formidable, forward-thinking mind. Nowhere is this more relevant than in his letter to Benjamin Vaughan in 1784, which states that 'The Eyes of other People are the Eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine Houses nor Fine Furniture.' For, while Franklin was born hundreds of years before the rise of the internet, his words resonate with vigour in today's digital world.

This rings particularly true when analysing the role of social media in modern society. That is, with the rise of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, there are more eyes on us than ever before, bringing enhanced scrutiny that risks ruining people both mentally and financially. According to the latest figures, around 1.62 billion people around the world use Facebook every day, with a further 500 million using Instagram and 217 million using Twitter. The average user is connected to around 150 people online, with their activities and photos reaching a wider social pool than ever before. With this comes greater levels of judgement, affecting our decision-making, and psychological and monetary wellbeing, in serious ways.

From an economic standpoint, it is now easier than ever for external forces to influence our spending decisions - encouraging us to splash out on fine clothes, fine houses and fine furniture, regardless of whether we actually want them or not. As more and more people find out what we do, what we wear, and where we live, the pressure to impress these people increases exponentially. In fact, over half (54%) of social media users admit that they feel a high need for others' approval, according to Curalate.

Due to this, an increasing number are making purchases for the sole purpose of achieving this approval, replicating peers' spending habits to do so. This was evidenced in research from Forbes, in which 81% of consumers admitted their choices are influenced by their friends' posts on social media, demonstrating a desire to be accepted in the eyes of other people.

While this may not be too serious an issue in itself, the more concerning statistic points out that this influence can lead individuals to purchase luxury products that they can ill afford - particularly those within younger generations, with Schwab's 2019 Modern Wealth survey finding that just under half of millennials have spent money on products and experiences that are out of their price range, predominantly due to social media pressure.

The influence of others' eyes has become increasingly ruinous in the current politico-economic crisis, as disposable incomes continue to shrink for an ever-expanding number of people. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, more than one in five in the UK are living in poverty - yet having less money to spend does not ease the pressure to spend. Rather, quite surprisingly, the opposite is true.

As Forbes' Peter Ubel puts it, "In places with great income inequality, those people with lower incomes live under great social stress. Their low position in the social hierarchy is more obvious and more consequential. In response, some poor people purchase the kinds of goods that create the impression that they have social resources to spare, even when they are cash-strapped." This social stress is present enough in the real world - expand that to the digital world, and it is only enhanced further. At a time when every penny counts, the need to be seen as luxurious on Facebook and Twitter, as belonging higher up this 'social hierarchy' within your digital community, has the potential to threaten livelihoods.

Yet social media can ruin people not just financially, but mentally too. Social pressure does not only affect people's wallets, but their minds. As users feel this need to impress, as they feel the weight of others' eyes on them, their self-esteem and confidence can take a notable nosedive.

As a recent Vertava Health blog explains, "Peer pressure can be made even worse when social media is involved." This is because "whether you're at school, work, or home, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat are always there." That is, peer pressure is ever-present in your pocket. The posts of friends, family and the wider world are always filtering into your life, into your brain. And so, "as you eye the likes, comments, and shares of dozens, hundreds or, in some cases, thousands of fans and followers, it can be difficult not to feel jealous." People want these likes, fans and followers for themselves, and will push their bodies and brains to the extreme to gain them.

Again, this is largely affecting younger people. Gen-Zers are twice as likely to use social media on a regular basis, and are thus significantly more likely to experience its harmful impacts. A report from the North London Psychiatry Practice found that 25% of teenagers believed that social media had a mostly negative effect on them due to peer pressure and the unrealistic impressions it gives of other people's lives.

Through increased usage of Facebook and Instagram, mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and body dysmorphia can take hold, with devastating effects. As youngsters know that the attention of countless people is on their photos, on their posts, on them as individuals, their self-esteem can sink like a lead balloon. "Young people are heavily influenced by celebrities and may desire to look like them," Jonathan Glazzard and Samuel Stones explain. "If they feel that this is unattainable it can result in depression, body-surveillance and low body-confidence."

At a time when one in five adolescents are living with mental health issues, how destructive could these influences be? As well as pushing us to spend beyond our means on fine clothes, fine houses and fine furniture, the desire to be seen as desirable can push us towards psychological catastrophe. Comparisons to others, the desire for approval, is ruining people's wellbeing and, in the most extreme cases, their lives.

So, while Benjamin Franklin may not have lived through the rise of the digital world, he may not have known what an iPhone is or how to post to Instagram, his messages remain profound regardless. Peer pressure - the "eyes of other people" - continues to ruin us, perhaps even more than it did back in the eighteenth century. The judgement of others follows us around in our pockets, wrestles control of our time and our attention on an unprecedented scale. And because of this, centuries after Franklin wrote this letter to Benjamin Vaughan, the words of this formidable mind resonate more resoundingly than ever before.