

## The Individual Harms of an Attention Economy: An Analysis of Castro and Pham's *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*

Amelia Bidini-Taylor

*Dalhousie University*

Studying how individuals interact with the attention economy can provide inciteful information in establishing the harms and effects of this system. Within their paper *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?* Authors Castro and Pham set out to provide a detailed account on the harms of the attention economy. Castro and Pham introduce the attention economy as a system and market that exists based on a set of transactions between consumers and media agents.<sup>1</sup> The two types of transitions are defined as follows “Those in which consumers give new media developers their literal attention in exchange for a service (such as a news feed or access to pictures of friends): and those in which developers auction off consumer attention to advertiser.”<sup>2</sup> Authors Castro, and Pham identify

---

<sup>1</sup>Clinton Castro & Adam K. Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, *Philosopher's Imprint* 20 (2020): 1-13.

<sup>2</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 2.

the attention economy as a market that fosters transactions within a noxious system. This essay will analyse Castro and Pham's paper *Is the Attention economy Noxious*, placing a large emphasis on how they identify the harms of the attention economy. This essay will outline and dissect how they associate the attention economy with harms to individuals.

Throughout this essay, I will argue that Castro and Pham misidentify the individual harms of the attention economy by misaligning mental health symptoms as a direct cause of the attention economy itself, rather than identifying the qualities of the attention economy which cause individual harm. I will argue that the individual harms that develop from the presence of an attention economy can be further explained by social factors, including how the attention economy changes social human interactions. Therefore, Castro and Pham's argument is missing the step of social analysis when they are examining individual harms. They fail to account for the impact that the attention economy has on humans' social capacities. To support my thesis, I will first present Castro and Pham's argument.

Castro and Pham outline optimality and freedom as the two favorable characteristics of the attention economy. These qualities are contested by the authors, in their criticism on the system. Due to the favourable qualities of the design the attention economies flaws must directly negate or contest these qualities. The flaws outlined and supported by Castro and Pham are as follows: the harm criteria (split into Harms to the individual and harms to society): followed by a criterion that rejects and infringes upon autonomy.<sup>3</sup> This paper will focus specifically on the harm criteria, presenting how the authors separate the harm into two categories, the harms

---

<sup>3</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 2.

to individuals and to society.

Castro and Pham primarily identify harm to individuals through the decline of emotional, psychological, and mental states. Individual harm as expressed psychologically is outlined by the authors and exhibited by the following quote: “Right around 2011. There began an unprecedented spike in mental health problems among teens and college students, a trend that has continued to the present.”<sup>4</sup> The symptoms that the authors present as harms are symptoms of mental health. They explain that these harms are exponentially dependent on social media or exist in correlation to the attention economy. They provide data to support the correlation between detreating mental health and the rise of smartphones and digital use:

“Twenge’s data paints a clear picture of the correlation between new media consumption and poor mental health outcomes. Her analysis of the MtF database revealed that consumption of social media was associated with high revealed that consumption of social media was associated with high relative risks of unhappiness (greater than 50%): loneliness (greater than 10%): and high depressive systems (greater than 25%) (Twenge, 2017, pp. 78-82).”<sup>5</sup>

The data Castro and Pham present is particularly focused on individual teens and university students, equating their declining mental health with the prominent increase in smartphone use.<sup>6</sup> Because of the evident connection between a generational increase

---

<sup>4</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 3.

<sup>6</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 4.

in technology and declining mental states, Castro, and Pham refrain from providing any alternative explanations for this correlation. The authors go on to explain how a decrease in mental health from social media is dependent on generational use, and therefore cannot an experience that all users face. The authors claim that younger generations who have grown up within the attention economy experience large amounts of harms.<sup>7</sup>

Although Castro and Pham outline the mental health claims of harms, they fail to expand on why the attention economy does such a prominent job on harming individuals. Nor do they present a sufficient theory on how to negate these psychological harms. In this next portion of the paper, I will provide an account of the social connection to individual harms, expanding on how changes in socialization cause direct psychological harm. This opposes Castro and Pham's proposed idea that individual harms are outlined as dependent on declining mental health from exposure to the attention economy.<sup>8</sup> I will present the claim that individual mental harms are reliant on how the process of the attention economy is changing people's social capacities on an individual's social level. Castro and Pham fail to establish this connection in detail and thus rely on a separation between societal and individual context to make their claim.

A large portion of Castro and Pham's individual harm argument revolves around the idea of a generational argument of harm, illustrating that the attention economy differs in harm depending on the impacted generation. This shows that in its true nature, the attention economy is not necessarily noxious for the individual. This is represented by the positive outcomes older generations

---

<sup>7</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 4.

<sup>8</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 4.

experience when engaging with the attention economy.<sup>9</sup> However, when focused on younger generations the correlation was there. Since this correlation is not general or universal, Castro and Pham should have further explored why this connection is vastly different. It cannot be solely due to the attention economy in nature, but rather the saturation and further harms of growing up within a digital world. Regrettably the authors don't explore the different socialization patterns between generations, failing to account for how this can play a role in determining the individual psychological harms experienced within an attention economy-based system. According to Castro and Pham older generations show positive mental results when interacting with social media as it allows them to reconnect to people and expand their social circles. The social circles that they were able to form prior to social media and without the aid of the attention economy.<sup>10</sup> Whereas younger generations use social media to form their initial social circles and it informs a large portion of their socialization. There must therefore be a connection between the harms of the attention economy and the socialization of younger generations, leading to declining mental health.

The correlation between declining mental health amongst young people is not intrinsically connected to the attention economy, but also to the skills that many younger generations lack due to the social impacts of technology. “Bonfini, co-editor of the second edition of *Casebook for DSM-5: Diagnosis and Treatment Planning*, observes that Generation Z as a whole lacks many of the social skills that previous generations learned through face-to-face inter-

---

<sup>9</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 4.

<sup>10</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 4.

actions.”<sup>11</sup> In an account of the harms of social media and the attention economy, Castro and Pham have neglected to create a holistic account that incorporates all the individual harms of social media. Specifically, how the attention economy affects social relationships, or how changing social skill could be the main source of declining mental health amongst younger generations. Harms to socialization are the driving force of the individual harms of the attention economy. When there are social harms to individuals and communities, psychological harms will develop since humans are inclined to engage in social and community-based activities. Castro and Pham are successful in outlining the negative qualities of the attention economy, however they put too much attention and value into individual psychological harm, without acknowledging the prevalence of the social harms that exist as a driving force for individual mental decline. Such as the changing nature of human interactions and how this would highly impact individual harm. The very nature of attention economy-based systems changes the precedent for socialization. How content is catered to individuals within an attention economy threatens the norms of digital media integration and distribution across social networks. This is exhibited by the following quote: “When people living in the same geographical area log into YouTube, by contrast, it is not at all likely that they will be offered the same content. Indeed, it is not at all likely that people living under the same roof will be offered the same content if they visit the site separately.”<sup>12</sup> The attention economy changes how we view the digital content that is integral to our experience within the modern age. Non-attention economy systems of media include a representation of universal cross-community

---

<sup>11</sup>Lindsey Phillips, *The emotional and social health needs of gen Z* (2022).

<sup>12</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 1.

sets of values. The attention economy therefore works to separate individuals from these inherent community-based grouping by individualizing content.<sup>13</sup> A positive symptom of this is that it allows individuals to be shown different perspectives. This could benefit individualization, especially if an individual is raised in a negative environment that is not suitable for their identity. The harm of forced individualization is the inability to be an active engaged participant within a community or social circle. An individual's social circle is greatly affected by the nature of the attention economy, resulting in changes to how younger generations socialize. Because Castro and Pham do not create the correlation between social factors and mental health, they do not form an adequate presentation of solutions, including community and social events to negate the use of social media. Social media can be a powerful tool for individualization and self-expression but needs to be met equally with other content that fills the gaps that social media performs.

In opposition to my argument that Castro and Pham's point is too narrow and misinterprets individual harm. One could say that their paper *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?* does discuss social harms as a separate system of harm formed throughout the attention economy. However, their argument for social harms is outlined as grand societal harms, represented by harms such as political threats, rather than the harms of individuals caused by changes in social interaction. Symptoms like isolation are analyzed through a societal impact by Castro and Pham, rather than as a force for individual decline in mental health. They view social harm through a large societal lens and fail to identify how social harms effect the individual. Their account on social harms is important, specifically for illustrating phenomena such as polarization and extrem-

---

<sup>13</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 1.

ism, however, is not a complete account of the creation of harm as it does not connect the social to the psychological.<sup>14</sup>

An attention economy can avoid certain qualities of a noxious system if it fixes how individuals interact, therefore reducing the potential for individual harm. A large portion of Castro and Pham's argument revolves around data that shows a correlation between the decline in psychological state of teenagers and the prevalence of social media and technology. Teenagers, and young adults represent a generation where social interactions are based around the use of technology, forming a new precedent to the effects of living within a digital world.

Castro and Pham's paper *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?* presents a correlation between smartphone use and negative mental health. Within their account of individual harms, the authors fail to identify the harms of attention economy to social networks. Castro and Pham introduce the impacts of the existence of a new generation of people whose social interactions are online, yet within Castro and Pham's paper there is little to no discussion on how this might impact socialization and the harms that come with these changes. Their account of harms is incomplete as they fail further exploring these alternative connections.

---

<sup>14</sup>Castro & Pham, *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*, 5.



## Bibliography

- Castro, Clinton & Pham, Adam (2020). *Is the Attention Economy Noxious?*. Philosophers' Imprint 20 (17):1-13.
- Phillips, Lindsey. (2022). *The emotional and social health needs of gen Z*. www.counseling.org. <https://www.counseling.org/publications/counseling-today-magazine/article-archive/article/legacy/the-emotional-and-social-health-needs-of-gen-z>