

**The Social Media Paradox: Balancing the Benefits & Detriments of Online Platforms for
Child & Youth's Mental Health & Well-being**

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Introduction:

Social media platforms have become invaluable tools in today's digital age, revolutionizing how people communicate, connect, and share knowledge. Although these platforms have enabled global connectivity and provided individuals with numerous opportunities, they also raise serious concerns about their effects on mental health, particularly among children and youth (Burton, 2019; Hoge, 2017). Research is increasingly exploring the relationship between social media use and mental health issues like body image dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019; Harriger, 2022). However, current research lacks in evaluating the strategies and algorithms of social media companies, with power dynamics and exploitation of power, further compounding the detrimental effects of the platform on users' wellbeing.

This essay seeks to investigate the destructive practices of social media companies as well as their connection to negative mental health in children and youth. Exploring this concept is facilitated by referring to theoretical frameworks such as Michel Foucault's concept of power. That said, one can argue that social media companies' exploitation of power and manipulation of user data contribute to these detrimental impacts on young minds. This analysis will provide a comprehensive investigation into harmful practices employed by social media companies, assess the impact of such practices on children and youth, in addition to suggest potential solutions that mitigate their negative consequences.

To this end, the essay is divided into four major sections. The first section will be a critique of online platforms and online celebrities such as 6ixBuzz, Myron Gaines and offline television. Over more, the second section will examine how social media companies utilize power and manipulate user data, drawing upon Foucault's concept of power to contextualize

their practices. The third section will explore the effects of social media on children and youth, particularly regarding body image dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression. Finally, the last section will discuss possible solutions to the current problem at hand. Ultimately, the essay proposes potential solutions such as holding social media corporations accountable, promoting digital literacy programs, and engaging parents in supporting their children's mental wellbeing.

Estimate on The Amount of Harvested Data:

Starting off, I wanted to investigate how much data social media companies like Meta, TikTok, and others are harvesting from their users while manipulating it for profit. To put into context just how serious and relevant this issue is, I used public statistics from these companies and estimated ranges of personal data harvesting.

Clario conducted a study that revealed Facebook collects 79.49% of user data on their platform, followed by Instagram at 69.23% and TikTok at 46.1% (Slynychuk, 2022). Clario's study revealed that Gmail, the platform with the lowest data collection percentage in his study, takes 12.82% of user information. In 2022, users spent an average of 153 minutes daily on social media platforms (Curry, 2023). Since 2014, the number of social media accounts has ballooned from 2.04 billion to 5.27 billion (Curry, 2023). For an accurate estimation, I assumed that 40% to 70% of Monthly Active Users (MDAUs) on platforms such as Twitter were active each month (Aslam, 2023). Ericsson (2022) estimated that in 2023 the average smartphone user will consume 19 GB of data per month, or 633 MB per day. If someone spends an hour each day on their phone using social media, this equates to an average data usage rate of 26.38 MB per hour or 0.44 MB per minute.

To estimate the global amount of personal data harvested by social media companies, I calculated:

Lower Bound:

$(0.44 \text{ MB/minute} * 12.82\% \text{ data consumption}) (153 \text{ minutes/day}) (2,040,000,000 \text{ accounts} * 40\% \text{ MDAUs}) = (0.056 \text{ MB/minute} * 153 \text{ minutes/day}) (816,000,000 \text{ MDAUs}) = 6,991,488,000 \text{ MB/day}$, or approximately 6.99 Petabytes per day (0.00000699 Zettabytes) and 0.00255 Zettabytes per year.

Upper Bound:

$(0.44 \text{ MB/minute} * 79.49\% \text{ data consumption}) (153 \text{ minutes/day}) (5,270,000,000 \text{ accounts} * 70\% \text{ MDAUs}) = (0.35 \text{ MB/minute} * 153 \text{ minutes/day}) (3,689,000,000 \text{ MDAUs}) = 342,130,950,000 \text{ MB/day}$, or 342.1 Petabytes per day (0.0003421 Zettabytes) and 0.1249 Zettabytes per year.

In conclusion, social media companies are estimated to harvest between 0.00255 and 0.1249 Zettabytes of personal data per year from their users. This number will only grow as time progresses as technology will only contain more complex code and information. After my findings, I wanted to believe that this is not the reality. Unfortunately, Andre (2023) explains that estimated the yearly data volume creation and consumption is 74 Zettabytes in 2021 and will rise to 149 Zettabytes by 2024. With the data volume creation and consumption values so high, my calculations make sense relative to the global usage. Overall, this highlights the significant impact social media companies have on not only children and youth but everyone by collecting and utilizing their personal data for manipulation and profit.

The Grooming of Children & Youth:

6ixBuzz:

Social media companies must grapple with the ethical implications on their collection and use of personal information. One potential concern is that this data could be filtered to suggest news platforms with political or racist prejudices. Ontario media page, 6ixBuzz is an example of such a platform. This popular youth and adult page began as an Instagram sensation before spreading onto websites like Twitter and TikTok. Unfortunately, this platform has caused real harm to businesses like “Wuhan Noodle 1950” in Markham whose owners lost nearly two-thirds of their customer base due to offensive posts on 6ixBuzz’s Instagram page (Kwong, 2020). Furthermore, the platform actively encourages anti-vaccine posts from prominent anti-vaccine figures like Chris Sky, further spreading misinformation regarding the global pandemic (Gammage, 2021). 6ixBuzz frequently criticizes Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal Government. On the other hand, the page remains neutral or shows support for Ontario Premier Doug Ford, his government, and the federal Conservative Party of Canada.

Appendices A-E illustrate how this platform uses a “meme-like format” to present its content as humorous, while pushing its far-right agenda and having its followers agree with its views. Similar to “The Truth Channel,” featured in “The Social Dilemma,” this fake news platform promotes sensationalized and false news stories to gain clicks, generate ad revenue, and push their own agenda within an echo-chamber (Orlowski, 2020). It is essential that the potential negative repercussions of such platforms on individuals and society as a whole be taken seriously. This necessitates greater accountability and transparency in how social media companies collect, use, and disclose personal information. Overall, news outlets provide facts so viewers can form their own opinion. Unfortunately, the platforms of today such as 6ixbuzz offer their opinions; leaving viewers left to decipher the facts.

Myron Gaines Critique:

Myron Gaines is a well-known public figure who has achieved notoriety through his online podcasts, where he engages in discussions on gender issues with multiple women aged 18-35 years. This essay, however, will not delve into the specifics of his podcast series. Instead, this essay will draw upon from his recent publication *Why Women Deserve Less* (2023). Mr. Gaines often refers to his book in podcasts as a kind of religious text that outlines his vision for how society should operate. As Mr. Gaines is a content creator, it is fair to assume that he has a particular outcome in mind when recording his podcasts. That is, one can argue that he tries to manipulate his guests into saying the things he wants his audience to hear. This is further supported by the fact that many of the women featured on his show resemble those that have been failed by the education system and lack the necessary abilities to access high-quality and accurate information. This leads them to agree with Mr. Gaines even when citing unreliable sources; ultimately leading his audience to accept his assertions without verification or validation.

I decided to assess Mr. Myron Gaines' book to see if it was well-referenced, since citing sources in a podcast context can be more challenging (though sources can still be included through descriptions or live editing). Unfortunately, my assessment of *Why Women Deserve Less* (2023) led me to conclude that it is poorly written. While writing style may vary, one can easily observe that Mr. Gaines is targeting a specific audience. What makes this writing poor is the use of excessive swearing, quotes from celebrities, an apparent agenda, and a tone of frustration and retaliation.

Mr. Gaines contends that “Nearly every man today is accused of unconsciously being a sexist or misogynist, benefiting from the evil that oppresses women daily. Yet most women don't

even know what misogyny means! Don't believe me? Watch my podcast when women foolishly call me a misogynist for stating an objective fact and the subsequent entertainment of asking them to define it after their false accusation. It is HILARIOUS!" (Gaines & Clarey, 2023, Chapter 4). While I understand his point, his justification lacks credibility; it relies mainly on the phrase "Trust me, Bro". This phrase has become common within misinformation communities where those without critical thought will likely accept whatever information provided - like how 6ixBuzz uses the same technique while hiding the intentional context.

Another issue I noticed in Mr. Gaines' book was his reliance on statistical sources from blog posts. For instance, his second and ninth sources were blog posts that only cited some of their sources, some of which were other blog posts; thus, it proved difficult to trace these back and assess their validity. Furthermore, as a university graduate, Mr. Gaines should have had enough expertise to find factual sources; therefore, it remains uncertain whether he is unconsciously spreading misinformation due to lack of expertise or deliberately pushing his beliefs in an effort to gain power.

The Overuse of Misunderstood Words:

Mr. Gaines' book makes some important observations about the overuse of terms like "misogynist", "lame", or "gay" among youth. This can be likened to the use of the label "Communist" during the Cold War as an insulting label for something perceived as undesirable. Nowadays, thanks to search engine accessibility and accurate definitions of terms used in the 21st century, youth should be able to comprehend and apply these words correctly. In the case of the terms "lame" or "gay", these words are by modern youth used when something is "bad" or "unfavourable". In examining the use of terms such as "lame" or "gay" by contemporary youth to denote something negative or undesirable, it becomes apparent that there is a concerning shift

in linguistic practices which inadvertently perpetuates prejudice and fosters a discriminatory environment. Originally intended to describe a person's disability or sexual orientation, these terms have been misappropriated and their misuse reinforces harmful stereotypes. When young individuals utilize these words to express dissatisfaction, they contribute to the marginalization of those who genuinely identify with the terms in their original context. It is crucial to address this issue through educational efforts that highlight the historical and cultural significance of these words, thereby fostering a more inclusive and empathetic discourse that aims to break down the detrimental associations formed over time. Unfortunately, misandry (opposite of misogyny) has seen a meteoric rise - particularly on social media platforms. Though many individuals express their disdain for men with phrases like “Men are trash” or “We do not need men”, there has been little dialogue surrounding this topic. Online echo chambers filled with opposing opinions are fueling unnecessary social wars among youth. Mr. Gaines laments how “modern women” have become delusional due to Instagram and other social media platforms, which has some validity; however, this finding is not gender specific. Paquin et al. (2022) states, that spending more than three hours daily on social media can significantly increase the risk of having psychotic experiences by 21%. Furthermore, those who spend over three hours daily are twice as likely to encounter these episodes compared to those who spend less than an hour daily (Paquin et al., 2022).

Why and How Do Social Media Companies Act This Way:

Neoliberalism:

Social media companies have come under fire for their business practices, which involve the misappropriation and abuse of users' data for profit. One theoretical perspective that can

explain these practices is neoliberalism, which emphasizes the privatization and commodification of public goods such as information and social connections. Peter Moss (2017) asserts that neoliberalism promotes individualism, competition, and consumerism - values which place market interests ahead of the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Moss does not specifically mention social media companies in his critique of neoliberalism, yet his ideas are highly applicable to an assessment of their practices. Social media companies' focus on maximizing profits through the commodification of user data and attention can exacerbate inequalities and lead to the privatization of public goods such as social connections and information.

Karl Marx's Theories of Capitalism:

Another theoretical framework which can guide the analysis of social media companies' practices is Marx's Theory (1977). Marx observed that capitalist companies exploit workers by isolating them from their jobs, the products they create, and each other. This alienation is caused by capitalism's emphasis on profit and efficiency, which devalues human labor and reduces workers to mere tools of production. Social media companies often treat user data like a commodity and prioritize profits over their users' wellbeing, which are known as "prosumers". This theory can provide insight into why they treat user data this way. Focusing on efficiency and profit can lead to the devaluation of human labor and commodification of user attention, leading to feelings of alienation and disempowerment among users. Additionally, social media companies may experience alienation among employees due to a lack of awareness regarding how their actions impact users. Focusing on efficiency and innovation may lead to an abdication from human consequences of work, leading to feelings of disconnect among staff members.

Marx (1990) documents how capitalists exploit their workers by paying them less than the full value of their labor - this exploitation serves as the source of profit under capitalism. This dynamic is also prevalent within social media companies, where those in power are aware of the harm caused by their practices but choose to remain silent through hush money payments. Due to their immense profitability, tech companies can afford such payments both to upper-level executives and lower-level workers alike. As noted in *The Social Dilemma*, “internet companies are the richest companies in history” (Orlowski, 2020). Furthermore, it is safe to assume that employees in lower positions may face job loss if they question or challenge the company’s practices, perpetuating a culture of silence and complicity.

Foucault & Power:

Furthermore, power abuse is a fundamental element in the destructive practices of social media companies. As Michel Foucault (1978, p. 93) wrote, “Power is not an institution or structure, nor is it a fixed strength that individuals possess. Rather, it is a complex strategic situation within a particular society”. This concept can be applied to how social media companies exercise their power and manipulate users. Social media companies are influential forces within contemporary society, often involved in complex strategic situations that exert substantial influence over their users’ thoughts, behaviours, and choices. Social media companies do this by amassing vast amounts of user data that they can use to curate the information people see on their platforms. With such control over information and attention, these firms have the capacity to shape user behaviour as well as influence the broader social and cultural landscape.

Social media companies are more than just institutions or structures; they play a significant role in society’s strategic context. Their influence over public discourse and politics, along with huge profits, is undeniable. Social media companies had an outsized social and

cultural impact that far outstripped their digital platforms. While power is never absolute or static, it is constantly negotiated within society; with their considerable resources and power, these entities could potentially tilt the scales in their favor at the cost of public good.

The Control of Media & Circumventing Responsibility:

To conclude the previous points, social media sites can take advantage of unique legal loopholes to avoid prosecution if any charges are leveled against them. On October 5, 2021, former Facebook employee Frances Haugen testified before the US Senate about how Facebook knows of the harmful effects its products have on young people, especially girls, yet has failed to address this problem (Allyn, 2021). Haugen asserts that Facebook puts profits ahead of user safety, encouraging users to spend more time on its platforms even if it negatively affects their mental wellbeing (Allyn, 2021). Facebook may have announced some changes to their policies and practices, but it is highly likely nothing substantive has actually changed as evidence of any such action is impossible. Stories like these are always swept under the carpet and social media companies rarely fear negative attention or publicity associated with such matters.

The Impact on Child & Youth:

Social media has become an integral part of children and youth's lives, but it is also having a significant impact on their mental health, including body image, anxiety, and depression (Burton, 2019; Hoge, 2017; Harriger, 2022). The journey many adolescents and young adults take into social media platforms has been likened to falling down a rabbit hole, where they are exposed to emotionally extreme content, edited bodies, and appearance-related concerns (Harriger, 2022). Research has consistently linked social media use to higher body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019) and photo or appearance-based activities have been found to have a deleterious effect on body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016;

Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). To continue, platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, which are more photo-based than Facebook and Twitter, are more likely to be linked to body dissatisfaction (Karsay, Trekels, Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2021; Wilksch, O'Shea, Ho, Byrne & Wade, 2020).

Following to the impact on body image, social media has been found to exacerbate anxiety and depression in children and youth (Burton, 2019; Hoge, 2017). Memes, which are a popular form of communication on social media, can contribute to the normalization of mental health struggles and lead to a sense of shared experience among users (Burton, 2019). In addition, Burton (2019) cautions that the use of memes as a coping mechanism can be a double-edged sword, as it may also lead to increased rumination and amplification of negative emotions. Hoge (2017) emphasizes that excessive digital media consumption can contribute to sleep disturbances, which are known to exacerbate anxiety and depression in children. Furthermore, the constant exposure to others' lives and achievements on social media can lead to social comparison and feelings of inadequacy, which may negatively affect self-esteem and mental well-being (Hoge, 2017).

Recent studies have found that dissociative imagination, a factor of the online disinhibition effect, has been observed in users of social media platforms such as TikTok, where users become dissociated from their online personas, which can infiltrate other aspects of their online lives (Suler, 2004, as cited by Clark, 2023). This phenomenon can make it difficult for individuals to separate personal fantasy from social reality, particularly when engaging with mental health content that involves acting out symptoms and experiences (Clark, 2023). Instead of viewing this disinhibition as a revelation of the "true self," it can be seen as a shift within the self-structure, where the online persona represents a different facet of the offline individual

(Clark, 2023). The spread of misinformation on social media can lead to erroneous self-diagnosis in users, and in some cases, may even cause individuals to manifest the symptoms they see others mentioning or acting out (Pringsheim et al., 2021, as cited by Clark, 2023, p. 3). The trust that social media users place in popular content creators, coupled with the prevalent culture of validating and valorizing self-diagnosis, contributes to an epidemic of erroneous self-diagnoses (Pringsheim et al., 2021, as cited by Clark, 2023, p. 72).

Power, validation, and iconicity can happen to be given to anyone, some examples of it being used for bad intentions are like the aforementioned 6ixbuzz and Myron Gaines. An example of dissociative imagination being employed with positive intentions can be observed in Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement, which gained prominence through the use of Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook (Olesen, 2020). Considering this, it is evident that anyone can experience the impacts of dissociative imagination. For instance, in the late 1960s, a child might have watched rocket ships on television and engaged in imaginative play as a "spaceman" or an astronaut. When such dissociative imagination fosters creativity and is harmless, it should be encouraged. However, the current digital landscape exposes children and youth to potentially harmful content, which may traumatize them or reinforce undesirable behaviors that any responsible parents would not want their children to adopt.

What Can Be Done:

Harriger (2022) suggests social media corporations should be held more accountable for the content they amplified using their algorithms. To develop initiatives that promote positive mental health among users, social media companies could collaborate with experts who specialize in body image, anxiety, depression and eating disorders (Harriger, 2022). This may

equally mitigate any harm caused by engaging on their platforms. Furthermore, influential people on social media must collaborate with experts in order to spread positive messages without perpetuating harmful body ideals or exacerbating mental health issues (Harriger, 2022).

Researchers, educators, and clinicians are advocating for the creation and implementation of social media literacy programs that foster critical thinking. Giving users the knowledge and skills to analyze, evaluate and participate in online activity (Paxton et al., 2022; Tamplin, McLean & Paxton, 2018 as cited by Harringer, 2022). These initiatives should not only address body image but also incorporate discussions regarding the relationship between social media usage, anxiety, and depression - including potential pitfalls when using memes as coping mechanisms as well as when seeking professional help when needed (Burton, 2019).

By far the most widespread of them all, parents can play an important role in supporting their children's mental health by modeling healthy relationships with social media. Parents can accomplish this by discussing unrealistic images and algorithms, creating social media contracts and family media use plans, as well as encouraging open communication about feelings of anxiety or depression associated with using these platforms (Derenne & Beresin, 2018; Harriger, 2022; Hoge, 2017). Fostering self-esteem, resilience and positive mental health in children and youth can be extremely beneficial (Hoge, 2017). Parents can encourage their kids to partake in physical activities, join clubs or organizations, or develop hobbies that provide a sense of accomplishment and connectedness.

Conclusion:

This essay has illustrated how social media companies, through their abuse of power and mishandling of user data, contribute to the detrimental effects on mental health among children and youth. By analyzing the destructive practices employed by social media companies and

applying Foucault's concept of power, it becomes evident that these corporations wield considerable influence over users - shaping their thoughts, behaviors, and decisions. These companies collect vast amounts of data that allows them to customize the information and content individuals see, potentially leading to issues like body image dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression among children and youth. Social media has become an integral part of modern life, with billions of users around the globe. These companies' vast array of data demonstrates why immediate action must be taken: To prevent negative repercussions caused by social media on children and youth mental health, collaboration between corporations, researchers, educators, clinicians and parents is necessary.

It is essential that stakeholders come together and hold social media corporations accountable, implement social media literacy programs, and involve parents in supporting their children's mental health. Promoting positive mental health initiatives and creating strategies that give users the knowledge necessary to navigate digital environments can help mitigate some of the detrimental effects of social media on children and youth. Further exploration is possible, revealing additional aspects about social media and mental health as well as evaluating the success of various interventions and initiatives. By better comprehending today's intricate digital world, we can work towards creating a healthier, more equitable, and socially responsible digital environment for all.

In closing, combatting the destructive practices of social media companies and their effects on children's mental health are of the utmost importance. By working together to find solutions and gain a better understanding of this issue, we can create a more positive digital landscape for future generations.

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Appendix A

“Meme that 6ixBuzz created to ask their audience to give a “more fitting” career path to the current Prime Minister of Canada.”



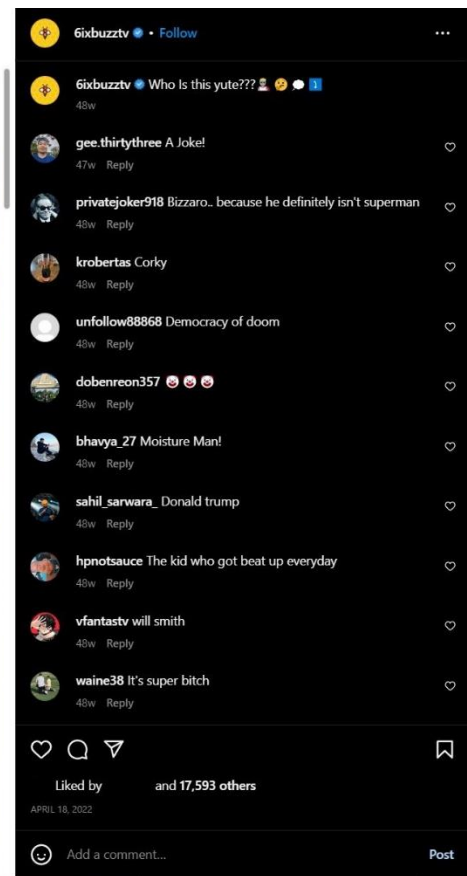
6ixBuzz [@6ixBuzz TV]. (2022, April 24). *If Justin Trudeau Never Went Into Politics, What Other Career Would You Recommend For Him??* [Instagram post]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcwYQdmJhi5/>

Appendix B

“Meme that 6ixBuzz created to ask their audience to purposefully describe the current Prime Minister of Canada as something but who he is. Specifically asking them to make fun of Justin Trudeau.”

Who Is This?

Wrong Answers Only



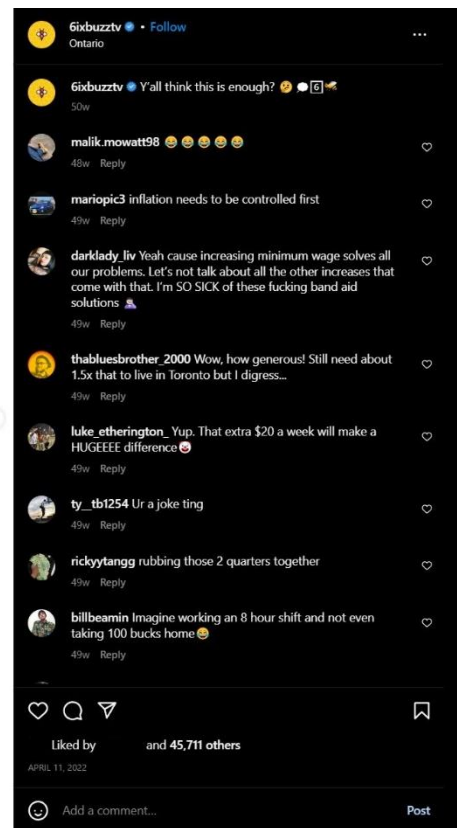
6ixBuzz [@6ixBuzz TV]. (2022, April 18). *Who Is this yute???* [Instagram post]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcgazMFO8o9/>

Appendix C

“Meme format that 6ixBuzz created to report actual news that the Conservative Ford Government has changed. Difference between this and the other two appendixes are that this has no possible negative connotations”



Doug Ford says minimum wage is going to raise to \$15.50 starting October 1st this year.

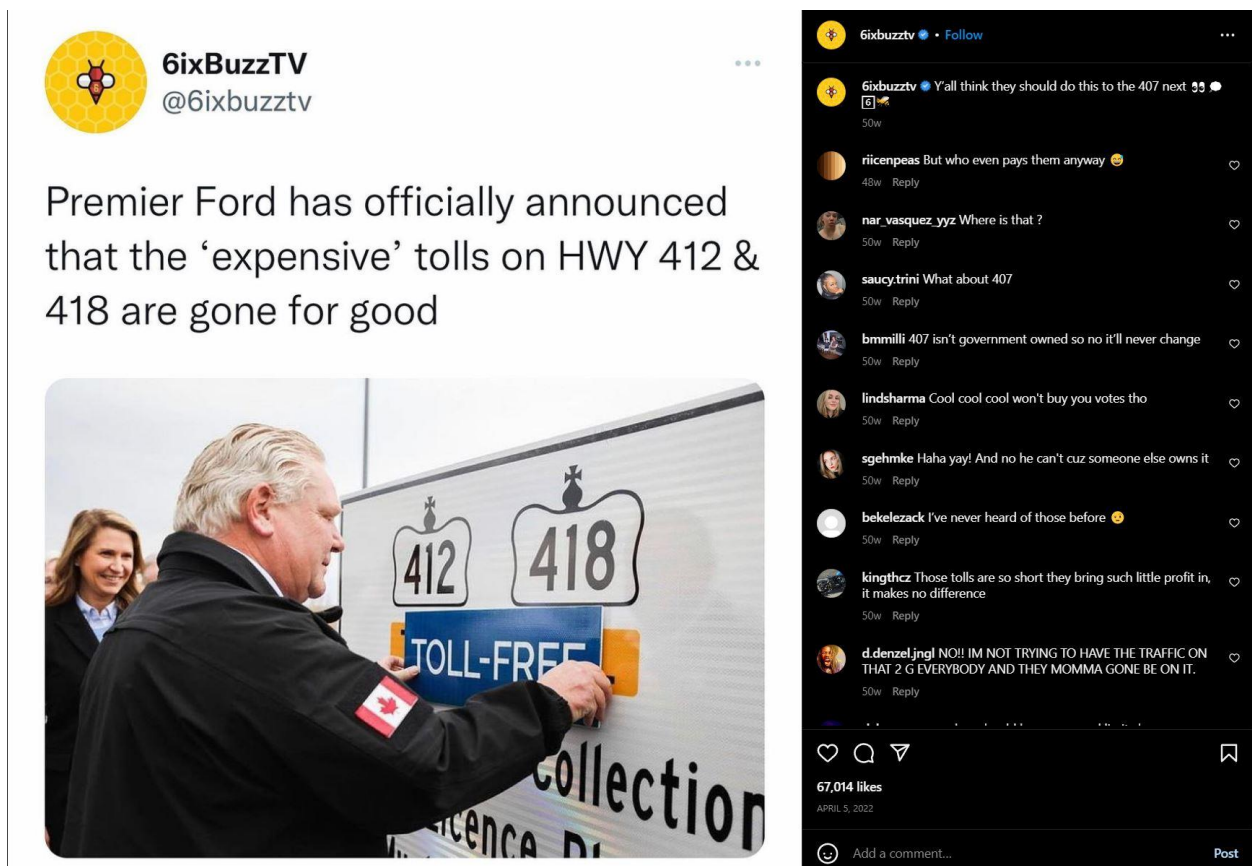


6ixBuzz [@6ixBuzz TV]. (2022, April 11). *Y'all think this is enough?* [Instagram post].

Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcNzfEHLNpo/>

Appendix D

“Meme format that 6ixBuzz created to report actual news that the Conservative Ford Government has changed. Difference between this and the first two appendixes are that this again has no possible negative connotations”



6ixBuzz [@6ixBuzz TV]. (2022, April 5). *Y'all think they should do this to the 407 next*

[Instagram post]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb_nGtIAACi/

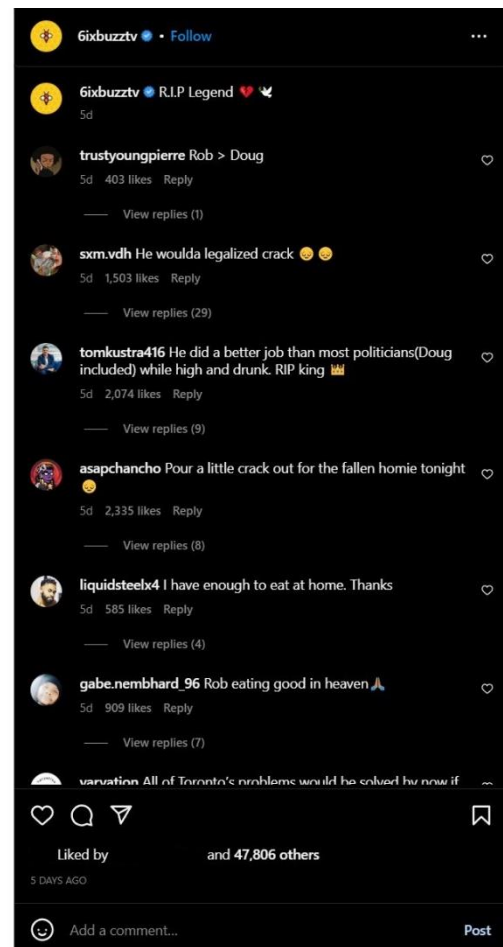
Appendix E

“6ixBuzz posting a tweet from Premier Doug Ford account, with clear connotations that they had an affinity for the late Rob Ford. Just to add, they have never done this for any left leaning politicians.”



Seven years ago, we lost the best mayor Toronto’s ever had.

Not a day goes by when I don’t think about my brother Rob. He dedicated his life to helping those who needed a champion most. I love you, Rob.



6ixBuzz [@6ixBuzz TV]. (2023, March 22). *R.I.P Legend* [Instagram post]. Retrieved from

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CqHCQSMgFqT/>

