Social Media and Algorithms

Created: May 2019
Last Updated: November 2019

Estimated time:	85 minutes ● [45 minutes] Activity #1 ● [20 minutes] Activity #2 ● [20 minutes] Assignment Depending on the time you have allotted for each group meeting, we suggest you engage in the "Assignment" in your second group convening.
Group or individual activity:	Group
Ages:	11-18 years old
Grades:	Grades 6-12
Online / offline elements:	This learning experience contains offline activities and two assignment options — both of which require computers or mobile devices with Internet access.
Areas:	Main area: Artificial Intelligence Additional areas: Computational Thinking, Data, Identity Exploration and Formation
License:	This learning experience has been created by Youth and Media and is licensed under a Creative Commons AttributionShareAlike 4.0 International license. For more information, please visit http://dcrp.berkman.harvard.edu/about This "Social Media and Algorithms" learning experience was created in collaboration with the Gobo team (Rahul

	Bhargava, Anna Chung, and Dennis Jen) at the Center for Civic Media at the MIT Media Lab.

Learning Goal

Participants will be able to understand various ways algorithms help shape the content they see on social media and apply these understandings to their own social media feed(s).

Materials

- [Choose one different Meet Quinn Participant Handout (i.e., from the Meet Quinn Handouts numbered one to four) to give to each group (you will divide participants into four groups in this learning experience).] Handout: Meet Quinn [educator version and participant versions]
- Each page on the following handout has four social media posts to be cut out. Please choose six to eight pages (i.e., 24-32 posts) to print out. Provide each of the four groups of participants with these 24-32 posts in an envelope.] Handout: Social Media Posts
- Four envelopes [Place the 24-32 cut out social media posts in one envelope per group (four groups).]
- Projector and projection screen OR, per participant, a handout of the full set of information about Quinn (the Meet Quinn — A More Complete Picture: Educator Handout)
- [For participants] Computers or mobile devices with Internet access
- [One per participant] Paper
- [One per participant] Pens or pencils

Resources

- Social Media Algorithms: Why You See What You See – by Sang Ah Kim (Georgetown Law Technology Review)

Activity #1: An Imperfect Feed

SAY:
- Many of you probably have an account on at least one type of social media platform — whether that might be Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, or a whole number of other platforms.
- Some of you might also have [multiple accounts on different platforms for different purposes](). You might use one platform to check out the news, another to connect with your friends, and yet another to watch the latest viral video.

ASK:
- What social media platform(s) do you use most often?
- Does anyone have [multiple accounts on a single platform]()?
- What do you usually see on your social media account(s)? If you have multiple accounts on one platform, do you see different content (e.g., photos, videos, text-based posts, ads, etc.) on each account?
- What do you think determines what you see (in terms of content such as photos, videos, text-based posts, ads, etc.)?

SAY:
- In this context, let's think about the concept of an algorithm. An algorithm is a clearly given set of step-by-step instructions to solve a problem or accomplish a task. [To learn more about what an algorithm is, please see the "[What Is an Algorithm?]()" learning experience.]

ASK:
- What role do you think algorithms play on social media?

SAY:
- On social media, algorithms are continually being designed to decide what you see. For instance, algorithms can decide how much content you see from your friends, family, and groups versus public content from businesses, brands, and media.
- Algorithms can also decide what content format to prioritize, such as video, text-based posts, or images.

- Most social media platforms keep track of your engagement with posts by friends, family, and groups, as well as your engagement with public posts from businesses, brands, and media. These platforms' algorithms can predict what you want to see based on these interactions.
- The ultimate goal is to put content in front of you that you are more likely to engage with by putting posts in your feed from the same, or similar, people and pages you have interacted with before.

ASK:
- To what extent do you feel that your social media feed(s) represent your preferences and interests?
- Have you ever come across a post in your feed(s) that stood out to you as irrelevant / inappropriate / thematically not aligned with your context and background? Would you feel comfortable sharing with the group why you felt this way? Why do you think the algorithms were showing this content?
- Are there any examples of social media posts that stood out to you as positive / timely / thematically very much aligned with your context and background? Would you feel comfortable sharing with the group why you felt this way?
- Let's suppose an algorithm works so that it only shows you content that you're 100% interested in. What might be the risk or downside to that? Do you think an algorithm should be programmed in such a way that, at times, it shows surprising content (i.e., serendipity)?
- Have you ever seen posts in your feed(s) where the content (e.g., a post addressing politics, or civic engagement issues) seemed suspicious / like it was intended to deceive you? If so, how often? Would anyone feel comfortable sharing an example of this type of post? What was your response when you saw it? [Some participants may have, for instance, dismissed the post, reported it, or talked about it with a friend or family member.]

SAY:
- To help us think a little more deeply about how algorithms shape social media feeds, let's engage in a group activity!

[Divide participants into four groups, and provide each group with one of the four Meet Quinn Handouts, and the set of 24-32 social media posts in an envelope. There should be four envelopes — one for each group.]

SAY:

- In your groups, first, take a look at the set of posts, and the information about Quinn provided on your handout. Next, select up to 18 posts and arrange them in an order that you think would create a feed relevant to Quinn. Think about what kind of content Quinn would most enjoy engaging with (e.g., time spent looking at, liking, clicking on, sharing, or resharing).

[Give participants 15 minutes to engage in this group exercise.]

[Reconvene all participants, with participants sitting in their group. Ask groups to designate a speaker to present their created feed. Have each group briefly explain 1) what information they received about Quinn, 2) which posts they selected and why, and 3) of the different pieces of information about Quinn provided on their handout, the content they focused on to create the feed.]

ASK:
- Was there any information about Quinn that you feel was particularly useful in creating the feed?
- Was there information about Quinn that you feel was less useful?
- Which pieces of information about Quinn did you prioritize over others?
- What information about Quinn would you have wanted to have — to make the algorithm produce a feed that would be even more relevant to Quinn — that you didn't have? Why would you want this information?

[For example, Quinn really cares about human rights. However, because participants only had one information point about human rights (i.e., a post about gender equality), it may have been difficult to tailor the feed to specific areas of human rights. It seems that Quinn is interested in gender equality, but is she interested in other human rights issues, and if so, which ones?]

Activity #2: A Fuller Picture

SAY:
- Each group received pieces of information about Quinn. Let's now bring all the information on Quinn together and think about how (if at all) our understanding of what an ideal feed and underlying algorithm for Quinn might be would change.

[Either project the complete set of information about Quinn ("Meet Quinn — A More Complete Picture: Educator Version") on a projection screen or print out and share a copy with each participant.]

ASK:
- Based on all the information you now know about Quinn, which of the existing feeds and underlying algorithms (created by the four groups) do you think Quinn would find the most engaging? Why?
- Knowing the full sum of information, would you keep one of the existing feeds (created by the four groups) and underlying algorithms or create a new feed?

Assignment (Option 1)

[Option 1, for participants ages 11-13] SAY:
- Now, let's apply what you learned today about social media and algorithms to your *own* social media feed. Choose an account from a specific social media platform, and select the first 18 posts that appear. Identify ten variables that you think the underlying algorithm is focused on (e.g., your engagement with posts from your friend, a local clothing store, or an athletic team), and write them down on your piece of paper.

[Pass out paper and pens or pencils.]

Assignment (Option 2)

[Option 2, for participants ages 14-18] SAY:
- For those of you interested in the data that informs the algorithm on your *own* social media feed, you can access and download a copy of the information that social media platforms have about you.
  - For those who have a Facebook account, log into Facebook on a desktop computer, and, on the top right of your home page, click the downward-facing blue arrow. From there, click Settings, and then click Your Facebook Information. Then click Download Your Information. Here, you can select which pieces of information you want to download (e.g., ads, location, posts, etc.).

- ○ For those who have an Instagram account, log into Instagram on a desktop computer and click on the Profile icon in the upper right-hand corner, shaped like a person, and then click on the Settings icon, which looks like a wheel. From there, click on the Privacy and Security button and scroll down to Account Data to click on View Account Data. To look at a specific type of data (e.g., current follow requests, hashtags you follow, accounts you blocked, etc.), click View All.
- If you have both a Facebook and Instagram account, feel free to try this exercise on both of these accounts!

[Pass out paper and pens or pencils.]

SAY:

- Based on this information, I'd like you to reflect, in writing, on the following questions:
  - ○ These files represent some of the data that Facebook and / or Instagram has collected about you. How does Facebook and / or Instagram having all of this information make you feel? Would you rather they did or didn't have this information?
  - ○ Does this information seem like an accurate representation of you / your preferences? Why or why not?
  - ○ To what extent do you see your preferences reflected or not reflected in your feed?
  - ○ Is there any other information about your interests and preferences you would want Facebook and / or Instagram to know about you so that your feed is even more relevant?
  - ○ What aspects of the information you downloaded do you think shape the algorithm that influences your feed?
  - ○ What other online platforms or services you engage with might affect your feed? For example, if you buy plane tickets online from a specific travel site, like Expedia, you might then see ads from this site on your social media feed(s).

Meet Quinn #1: Participant Handout

- Is 16 years old
- Best friend's name is Sara
- Already has an iPhone 11

Likes:
- Halloween
- Music — especially K-Pop; also plays the piano

Doesn't like:
- Milk and ice cream — is lactose intolerant

Meet Quinn #2: Participant Handout

- Preferred pronouns are she / her / hers
- Feels strongly about human rights — regularly speaks up for gender equality

Likes:
- Healthy food

Doesn't like:
- Fashion
- TV — doesn't own a TV. Sometimes watches Netflix

Meet Quinn #3: Participant Handout

- Preferred pronouns are she / her / hers
- Best friend's name is Sara
- Cares about friends' opinions
- Cares about school — sometimes stresses out about tests

Likes:
- Coffee
- Colombia — is considering a year abroad
- Halloween
- Cats — has one named Max
- Healthy food
- Music — especially K-Pop; also plays the piano

Doesn't like:
- Fashion
- Games

Meet Quinn #4: Participant Handout

- Is 16 years old

Likes:
- Coffee
- Colombia — is considering a year abroad
- Halloween
- Cats — has one named Max
- Healthy food
- Music — especially K-Pop; also plays the piano

Doesn't like:
- Fashion
- Games
- Milk and ice cream — is lactose intolerant
- TV — doesn't own a TV. Sometimes watches Netflix

Meet Quinn — A More Complete Picture: Educator Handout

- Preferred pronouns are she / her / hers
- Is 16 years old
- Best friend's name is Sara
- Cares about friends' opinions
- Feels strongly about human rights — regularly speaks up for gender equality
- Cares about school — sometimes stresses out about tests
- Already has an iPhone 11

Likes:
- Coffee
- Colombia — is considering a year abroad
- Halloween
- Cats — has one named Max
- Healthy food
- Music — especially K-Pop; also plays the piano

Doesn't like:
- Fashion
- Games
- Milk and ice cream — is lactose intolerant
- TV — doesn't own a TV. Sometimes watches Netflix

Niepce Clothing Inc

11 Collection x Niepce Inc
Selling Out Fast!! Purchase now before its all gone!

Shop Now

❤ 😊 ☹ 850
96 COMMENTS
122 SHARES

COMMENT SHARE

__lillyz__finsta__

Friend: You've already said that joke before

Me:

M

Bart has 6 cool sayings

__lillyz__finsta__ guys im so stressed abt this bio test rn gfdsjkghjkdsf

❤ 😊 ☹ 12
2 COMMENTS
0 SHARES

COMMENT SHARE

McDonald's

mcdonalds ✔ Hunger got you seeing things again? Take a break with a hot (crispy) friend 🍟 #BackInSchool

❤ 😊 ☹ 44.8k
1.7k COMMENTS
459 SHARES

COMMENT SHARE

The New York Times

NYTIMES.COM
What Greta Gerwig Saw in 'Little Women': 'Those Are My Girls'
The filmmaker didn't so much adapt the Louisa May Alcott novel as...

❤ 😊 ☹ 607
27 COMMENTS
91 SHARES

COMMENT SHARE

Nike

CAN'T-MISS MUST-HAVES
What NYC's ballers are wearing on the court this winter.

Shop

❤ ☺ ☹ 45
46 COMMENTS
124 SHARES

Tyla

Your first look at the new cast is here. I CAN'T COPE 😱😱

TYLA.COM
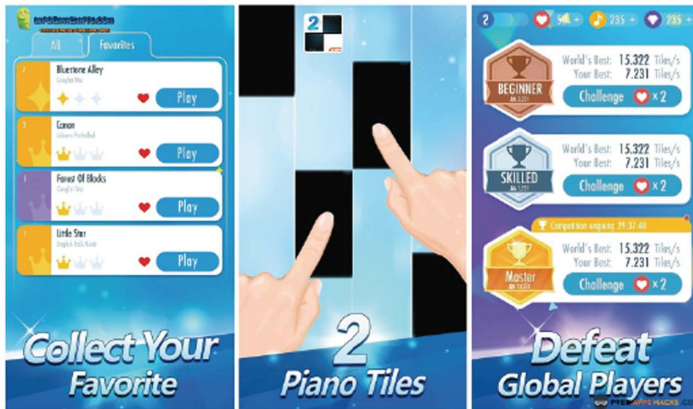**Netflix Just Dropped A Preview For 'You' Season 2 And It's Creepy AF**
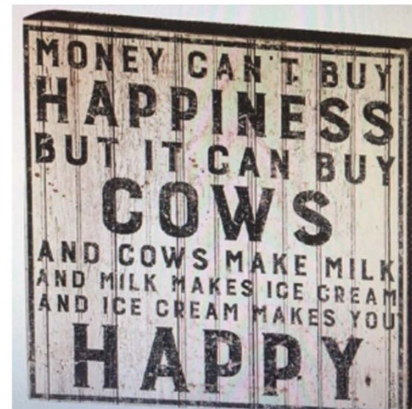
❤ ☺ ☹ 147
241 COMMENTS
45 SHARES

Piano Tiles

Collect Your Favorite

2 Piano Tiles

Defeat Global Players

❤ ☺ ☹ 184
56 COMMENTS
17 SHARES

Dairy Dealer LLC

MONEY CAN'T BUY HAPPINESS BUT IT CAN BUY COWS AND COWS MAKE MILK AND MILK MAKES ICE CREAM AND ICE CREAM MAKES YOU HAPPY.

❤ ☺ ☹ 26.3k
834 COMMENTS
316 SHARES

Laughing Squid

Free Couch!!!
If you liked "Free Couch!!!", you might also enjoy...
laughingsquid.com

♥ ☺ ☹ 17
1 COMMENTS
1 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

mental_floss

Good Morning!

This Ejector Bed Keeps You From Sleeping In
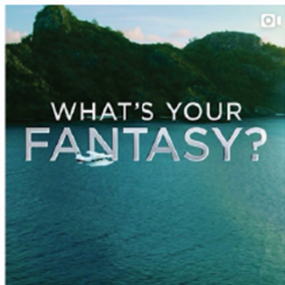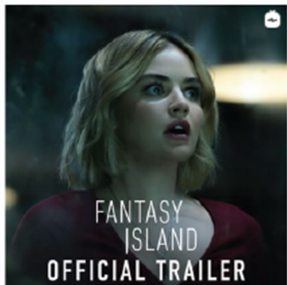mentalfloss.com

♥ ☺ ☹ 830
123 COMMENTS
94 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

Fantasy Island Movie

Screams come true.
Watch the new trailer for @Blumhouse's #FantasyIslandMovie,
in theaters Valentine's Day. #NeverComingHome

♥ ☺ ☹ 932
47 COMMENTS
18 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

The Guardian

"I didn't really feel pain at first; it was just a kind of probing feeling. I felt around under the sweater I had on and was relieved to realise that the blade seemed to be in my pectoral muscle and not my heart. The captain didn't want to pull out the blade because he wasn't sure... Continue Reading

Experience: I stabbed myself in the chest
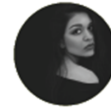theguardian.com

♥ ☺ ☹ 109
8 COMMENTS
11 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

apple

iPhone 11   iPhone 11 Pro

COMMENT   SHARE   288k
677 COMMENTS
483 SHARES

audreyreid

audreyreid yum !! 😋

COMMENT   SHARE   216
22 COMMENTS
1 SHARES

carolina.b

carolina.b 🌲 🏞️ 🌳

COMMENT   SHARE   1.3k
53 COMMENTS
3 SHARES

celia_an

celia_an so excited for the concert tonight!!

COMMENT   SHARE   93
7 COMMENTS
0 SHARES

Fortnite

❤ 😊 😞 98.3k
4.3k COMMENTS
834 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

---

celia_an

celia_an the concert last night was amazing!!!

❤ 😊 😞 132
10 COMMENTS
1 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

---

saraigual

saraigual love these ladies <3

❤ 😊 😞 56
3 COMMENTS
0 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

---

suziecat02

suziecat02 best. vacation. EVER.

❤ 😊 😞 274
23 COMMENTS
1 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

BuzzFeed Quizzes

QUIZ

We Got BTS To Take Our "Which Member Of BTS Are You?" Quiz

Now's your chance to play along with the band and find out which member ~you're~ most similar to...

COMMENT SHARE

63.2K
303 COMMENTS
730 SHARES

YouTube

The Rise Of Skywalker Palpatine's Son! Shocking...
MIKE ZEROH
7.1K views • 1 day ago

Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker - Official Final...
IGN ✓
1.8M views • 2 weeks ago

STAR WARS 9 Final Trailer (NEW 2019) The Rise of...
ONE Media ✓
161K views • 2 weeks ago

COMMENT SHARE

699.4K
78.5 COMMENTS
490 SHARES

NHLBruins

7:00 PM
• TD GARDEN •
BOSTON
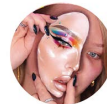
Game day presented by @jet-blue! The #NHLBruins face the Penguins at TD Garden tonight at 7PM ET. @NESN, @nhlnet-work @985TheSportsHub

COMMENT SHARE

21K
42 COMMENTS
221 SHARES

NikkieTutorials

Doing My Makeup, ALONE in a HAUNTED FOREST! | NikkieTutorials

COMMENT SHARE

53K
5.2K COMMENTS
4.8K SHARES

amazon

See our new Echo products at amazon.com/morealexa

♡ ☺ ☹   4,146
390 COMMENTS
277 SHARES

BerkleeCollege

Are you attending a program with us this summer? Join our social media groups to stay connected and meet other students before coming to Boston!

#berkleesummer #berklee #berkleecollegeofmusic

ATTENDING A PROGRAM?

♡ ☺ ☹   240
22 COMMENTS
6 SHARES

Cambridge Public High

Youth and Vaping Presentation

Tuesday, October 29, 6 p.m. to 7 p.m.

♡ ☺ ☹   2
0 COMMENTS
1 SHARE

billieeilish

IM GOING ON TOUR AGAIN AND IM ACTUALLY EXCITED ABOUT IT THIS TIME. can't wait to see you all :-)

BILLIE EILISH
WHERE DO WE GO?
WORLD TOUR

03/09 MIAMI, FL	03/29 OMAHA, NE	06/07 BOGOTA, COLOMBIA
03/10 ORLANDO, FL	04/01 DENVER, CO	07/09 TBA, SPAIN
03/12 RALEIGH, NC	04/04 LOS ANGELES, CA	07/10 LISBON, PORTUGAL
03/13 PHILADELPHIA, PA	04/05 LOS ANGELES, CA	07/14 AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS
03/15 NEW YORK, NY	04/07 SAN FRANCISCO, CA	07/14 BERLIN, GERMANY
03/16 NEWARK, NJ	04/08 SACRAMENTO, CA	07/15 COLOGNE, GERMANY
03/18 WASHINGTON, DC	04/10 SEATTLE, WA	07/17 MILANO, ITALY
03/19 BOSTON, MA	04/11 VANCOUVER, BC	07/17 PARIS, FRANCE
03/20 BROOKLYN, NY	05/23 GUADALAJARA, MEXICO	07/19 WERCHTER, BELGIUM
03/23 DETROIT, MI	05/27 MEXICO CITY, MEXICO	07/21 MANCHESTER, UK
03/24 CHICAGO, IL	05/30 SAO PAULO, BRAZIL	07/22 MANCHESTER, UK

♡ ☺ ☹   5.6M
72.2K COMMENTS
839.3M SHARES

Northeastern University

Vibrant foliage and afternoon sunshine at Northeastern in Boston.

♥ ☺ ☹ 1,367
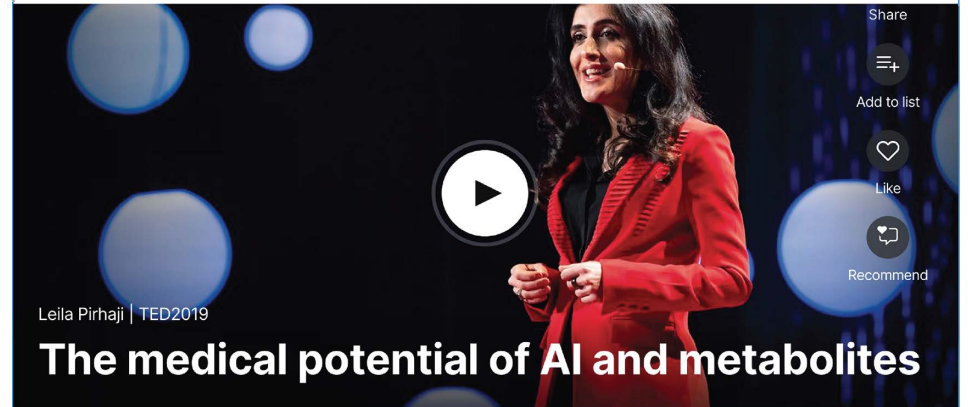12 COMMENTS
28 SHARES

❤ ☺ COMMENT ⬆ SHARE

TED TEDTalks

Share

Add to list

Like

Recommend

Leila Pirhaji | TED2019

The medical potential of AI and metabolites

♥ ☺ ☹ 50.9K
89 COMMENTS
788 SHARES

❤ ☺ ☹ COMMENT ⬆ SHARE

NatGeoChannel

Animal Fight Night: Homewrecking Penguin

♥ ☺ ☹ 344.6k
12.8K COMMENTS
244.7K SHARES

❤ ☺ ☹ COMMENT ⬆ SHARE

Ninja

5:56 / 12:22
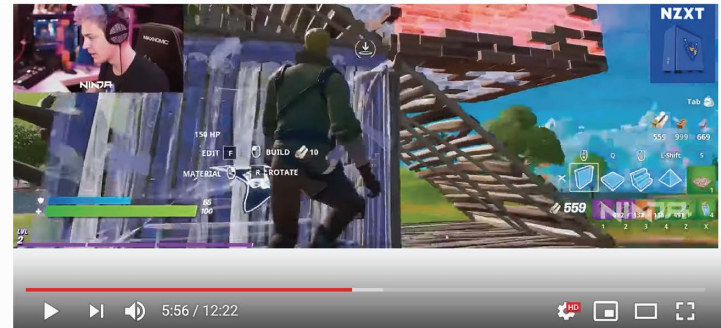
#TeamNinja #Fortnite #Ninja
MY FIRST WIN IN FORTNITE CHAPTER 2 (Fortnite: Battle Royale)

♥ ☺ ☹ 131K
5,559 COMMENTS
139K SHARES

❤ ☺ ☹ COMMENT ⬆ SHARE

DailyMemeDose

The sound of chips in my mouth

The sound of the TV

LOL! Follow @DailyMemeDose for more!
#meme #funny #dailymeme
#dailymemedose #viral
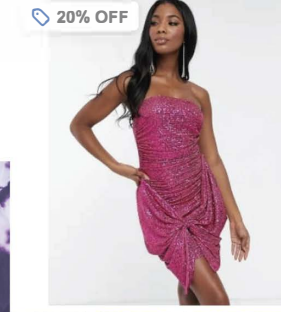#laugh #followers #follow #memes

467
18 COMMENTS
92 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

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asos
discover fashion online

20% OFF

HEY, YOU'RE NEW HERE! GET 10% OFF WITH CODE: ASOSNEW19

Club L London Sequin Bandeau Oversized Bow Dress in Pink

$111.00
ASOS

This is ASOS
ASOS DESIGN and 850+ brands
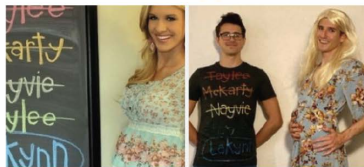
28
12 COMMENTS
5 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

BuzzFeed (MEDIA COMPANY)

BuzzFeed, Inc. is an *American Internet media, news and entertainment company with a focus on digital media; it is based in New York City. BuzzFeed was founded in 2006 by Jonah Peretti and John S. Johnson III, to focus on tracking viral content.*

Halloween Costume Inspo

18 Of The Best Halloween Costumes From This Weekend

Featuring memes, pop culture references, and more.

Lorem ipsum

All The Celebrity Halloween Costumes From This Year — So Far

21 Last-Minute Halloween Costumes From Amazon You'll Want To Wear

50 Last-Minute Halloween Costume Ideas You'll Actually Like

24 Pop Culture Costumes People Will Definitely Be Wearing This Halloween

74
28 COMMENTS
12 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

JV   JUAN VALDEZ (COLOMBIAN COFFEE)

Juan Valdez
Café de Colombia

Price: **$19.99** ($2.00 / Ounce) + $4.99 shipping

Size: **10 oz**

- New Package Ship World Wide

241
19 COMMENTS
7 SHARES

COMMENT   SHARE

Post 1

GREAT FRIEND FROM HIGH SCHOOL

PUT THIS ON YOUR PAGE AND LET EVERYONE DESCRIBE YOU IN ONE WORD
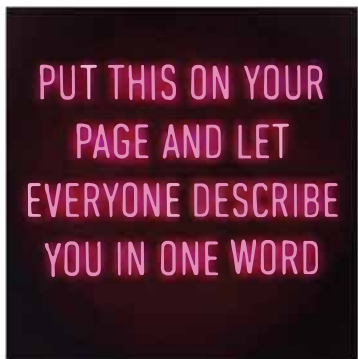
❤️ 😊 ☹️ 25
💬 COMMENT ⬆️ SHARE
8 COMMENTS
5 SHARES

Post 2

starface
Sponsored

*teen*VOGUE

"Hydrocolloid pimple patches that help you banish those zits for good."

Proven to make pimples disappear overnight and protect skin from outside bacteria. Powered by super-healing hydrocolloid. Free shipping within the US. Leaping Bunny Certified. Cruelty Free. Oil Free.
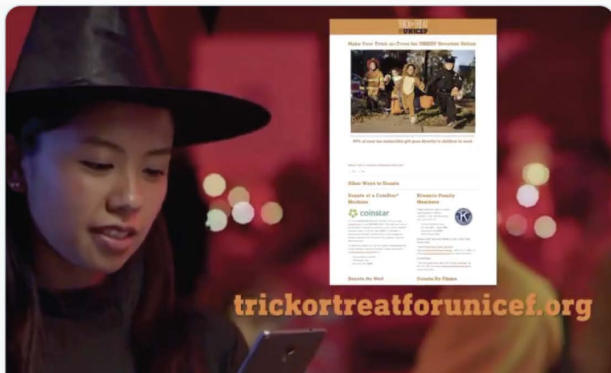
Learn More ›

❤️ 😊 ☹️ 9000
💬 COMMENT ⬆️ SHARE
200 COMMENTS
15 SHARES

Post 3

Heidi Klum
We can ALL be heroes this Halloween and help kids around the world by Trick-or-Treating for @UNICEFUSA! 🎃 When you #ToT4UNICEF, every dollar you raise makes a difference. Learn more about the many ways #WeCanAllBeHeroes all month long at trickortreatforunicef.org

trickortreatforunicef.org

❤️ 😊 ☹️ 29
💬 COMMENT ⬆️ SHARE
1 COMMENT
13 SHARES

Post 4

The Washington Post

The Americas

Newly elected Bogota mayor a 'huge step forward' for women

BOGOTA, Colombia — Months before her history-making election, Claudia López was butting heads with a local television anchor over his description of her character.

"You talk sometimes like you're arguing," he quipped on a live segment.

"Don't come at me with that condescending chauvinism," she shot back.

Now the 49-year-old politician with a doctorate from Northwestern University in Chicago will take her decades-long fight against corruption and inequality to the big stage as the first elected female mayor of Colombia's largest city.

Claudia Lopez, candidate for mayor of Bogota with the Green Alliance, celebrates her election victory in Bogota, Colombia, Sunday, Oct. 27, 2019. Colombians went to the polls Sunday to choose mayors, state governors and local assemblies. (Iwn Valencia/AP)

❤️ 😊 ☹️ 41059
💬 COMMENT ⬆️ SHARE
87 COMMENTS
172 SHARES