Is it ethically wrong for cigarette manufacturers to produce cigarettes, if there are customers who will autonomously purchase them, while being aware of the health consequences? The answer is unclear, but it is clearly a question that has been previously debated, due to the FDA’s requirement of tobacco companies to display the risks of lung cancer on their packaging. Harmful substances and physical health concerns have long been topics of public debate. Less publicly debated, are the mental health risks of moderate to excessive usage of social media. Like cigarettes, at times in the past, social media has become intertwined with a typical socially involved person’s life. The question, stemming from concerns of the ethical use and production of technology, is: should something be done, or should warnings be given, to better negate the damages that social media can cause in the lives of its users?

In an article titled, “The FOMO Is Real: How Social Media Increases Depression and Loneliness” on Healthline.com, the author, Gigen Mammoser, outlines a study that seems to confirm what many people have suspected of social media for a long time: there is a negative correlation between social media usage time, and ratings of mental health. The researchers identified a causal relationship between social media usage and levels of mental health, by doing an experiment involving 143 students, wherein one group lowered social media usage levels to 30 minutes per day, and the control group’s usage levels remained constant. Acknowledging the choice to still allow the less-usage group to use social media at all, Mammoser says “We didn’t think [complete abstinence] was an accurate representation of the landscape of the world that we live in today. Social media is around us in so many capacities.” (Mammoser, 2018). The study concluded, that “No matter where they started off, if they were told to limit their social media, they had less depression, no matter what their initial levels were.” (Mammoser, 2018). While there are many obvious benefits to the existence of social media, such as increased communication, networking, and sustainment of long-distances relationships, the usage of these technologies prove to have a measurably negative effect on users at an individual level.

With the digital advertising market growing rapidly, and social media companies still seeing increasing levels of profit, it seems unlikely, in the near future, that we will see a decrease in the involvement of social media in the lives of an average American. If the findings in the study that is referenced in the article is correct, this means that we will also likely see continuing decreases in the average mental health of social media users. With research on the exact reasons that social media is harming the mental health of users continuing, if we are not already, we will soon be forced to face the ethical question: should something be done to address the problems that technologies are causing through social media?
The interest that I have in the linkage of depression and social media comes from a curiosity of what a life without social media would have looked like. Social media has permanently changed the social structure of the world. The children growing up now are the first generation who will grow up in a world where it is normal to “know” someone, before you actually know them. The parents of children in college in high school right now grew up in a world where you knew no one until you met them. You knew nothing about them, until you talked to them, and learned it for yourself. Now, we can learn about people without them saying anything to us. This places an enormous pressure on every single person to share a positive image of themselves at all times. Social media has transformed ideas of self-image, and consequently, self-esteem. It is so easy to compare oneself to others on social media, that it happens even subconsciously.

Mammoser uses the example of the very real concept, the fear of missing out, called “FOMO” for short, to explain this social comparison (Mammoser, 2018). Likes, comments, upvotes, favorites, and retweets have become tangible measurements of social acceptance and agreement. While it would be easy to complain about all of the effects that social media has had on society, it is useless, when compared to asking questions about what can be done, if anything could be done, and if something should be done to erase, or repair some of the detrimental effects that social media has had on life in general.

If, hypothetically, the world came to discover that social media had lowered the quality of life that its users are experiencing, what could be done to lessen these damages? Additionally, do creators of these technologies, legal regulators, parents, or any other parties have any responsibility to do something about these damages? Some things that could be done, disregarding reasonability, are enforced limits on usage, warnings upon downloading, or increased age requirements. To complicate the topic of ethics in technology even further, do any of the previously named parties have any right to limit the use of technology, since people are willingly choosing to use them? There is no black-and-white correct answer, but the best option that we appear to have right now, would be to continue studies on the topic, and to publish and spread the findings to ensure that every user is being mindful about their usage and its effects on their life.

Potentially, I could see a career in the field of the psychological effects of new technologies on human life. New technologies are being created everyday, and their effects are often neglected, hidden, or disregarded. With emerging information and shifting public attitudes, I believe that there is a public demand for explanations of the effects of these influences on social and private life. Further than a demand for research, is what will eventually come to fill the hole of our existing social medias if we ever decide that we want to change how we are using technologies to connect with our peers. This might mean a demand for new, alternative methods of social media, or possibly even applications or technologies entirely different from our current idea of
what social media. Applications like Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, and other dating or friendship applications could be the first step in the right direction of using technology to fight loneliness and depression, rather than causing it.

From examining the effects of social media on mental health, I believe that there are findings that could expose facets of demand that will lead way to social uses of technology that have a positive public image, rather than the increasingly negative image that many of today’s popular social media apps have. Studies like Mammoser’s will prove to be increasingly important in the direction that technology producers are moving with their social applications. Through examining the harms and benefits of social media, we will be able to better embrace ethical practices of technology.