

## Slowcial media: exploring the need to design a social media platform that integrates nature

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### ABSTRACT

This project considers a rebalancing of natural and digital lifestyles, challenging the human disconnect with nature as the conversation grows about the pressures of social media and a need to disconnect with the digital. Finding a way to do so can be difficult to navigate for millennials (people born between 1980 and 1996) who have grown up surrounded by its use. The fear of missing out can leave social media users reluctant to step away from their beloved digital devices. However, in this project I explore the visual language needed to engage those users in a different type of social media platform, which instead focusses on creating meaningful interactions in the real world with nature.

Through the use of a plant-monitoring social media application, users can be reconnected with nature (advantageous for their wellbeing) and remember the importance of looking after themselves. The application, a SLOWcial media-based provision entitled 'ROOT', incorporates key features of social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest while stripping back the interface into an easily accessible format.

### Introduction

There is a growing conversation about the pressures of social media and what it does to our well-being and mental health. This is signalling a shift away from the glossy and 'perfect' representation of life in the highly saturated virtual world of social media.

Instead, Wunderman Thompson suggest that social media users are looking to embrace the great outdoors and disconnect from the virtual world, reducing screen time and re-engaging with nature (Wunderman Thompson, 2018). As the cynical culture of visually novel experiences wanes, we find ourselves hunting for more tangible experiences that allow us to connect with others, share and grow

as individuals. Immersion in nature is once again playing a role in benefiting our social connections.

### Aims of the project

This project explores how these two ideas can link together in how we might use social media as a vehicle for encouraging people to connect with nature and with others. The exploration in how design can play a role in creating a tool for bringing together the digital world with the natural world in mutually beneficial ways, has led to the creation of an alternative social media-based provision. *ROOT* is connected to a living plant within the home - only when the plant is healthy can access to the social aspects of the app be granted. Interactions on the app are limited initially to four per day, intended to make conversations more thoughtful, meaningful and considered. These interactions can be increased

depending on how much time the user spends outdoors. The ‘home feed’ of the app features a filtering system, encouraging users to share images and posts about their outdoor adventures, gardening tips and plant progress, focusing much less on ‘selfies’. This SLOWcial media app, allows the user to focus on real life experiences and targets the impatient interactions currently displayed on social media.

As a designer, I have developed a visual language that re-conceptualises the great outdoors, moving away from traditional handmade aesthetics and ‘earth tones’ to provide a more contemporary way of promoting the natural world for a digital age.

### **The human disconnect and visually novel experiences**

It is no surprise that the images seen on social media have a negative impact on mental health. Polished and airbrushed celebrities and influencers who buy followers and advertise products we don’t need, feed into the fear of missing out.

In a bid to combat this, social media giant Facebook have added an *Online well-being* section, with its sister company Instagram introducing a well-being division. Encouraging people to ‘foster some kindness in the community’ in May 2018, Google also released a Digital Well-being initiative, which encourages users to monitor their habits and use social media in a much healthier way (Wunderman Thompson, 2018). It could however be argued that these companies are less interested in the impact they have on the great masses of people on the other side of the screen, than they are in making ‘token efforts’ to be seen trying to help the users who over consume content or exhibit anti-social behaviour on their platforms.

Instead of it being a platform to connect to friends, distant family members and share life events; social media has become a way for advertisers to target users and sell even more to them. With over 3 billion social media users worldwide (Kemp, 2019), clearly, there is a call for a platform which reconnects us and encourages us in new ways to help ourselves and others. For the ‘impatient generation’ to invest time in anything other than easily absorbed content is difficult, but raising the awareness of getting away from the current digital experience is integral to mental health. “When people spend a lot of time passively consuming

information—reading but not interacting with people—they report feeling worse afterward (Ginsberg & Burk, cited by Smith, 2017).”

It is apparent that the use of social media feeds into the human disconnect with nature. Amanda Hess writes in her article: *The existential void of the pop-up experience*, about her time spent at immersive events, which have become increasingly popular in recent years. The images from these experiences can sometimes seem like they are even better than real life, as they merely provide a backdrop to shoot pictures that pop and dazzle when we look back on them, rather than a fabulous memory to be reminded of by the photograph. In contrast, consider the experience of standing on the edge of a vast mountain range, or witnessing a butterfly land onto a flower adjacent to where you sip your morning coffee. When we might pull out our phones to try and capture such moments, we are left with something that pales in comparison to the actual experience (Hess, 2018). As Hess argues, (digital) images:

“Take nature and art and knowledge seeking, flatten them into sight gags and stick them onto every stray surface” (Hess, para 10, 2018).

Ibrahim suggests that the need to capture the everyday, banal imagery “transforms the perfunctory into the performative (Ibrahim, 2015). This changes how we interact with others and portray ourselves on social media, shifting what kinds of images hold our attention and value.

### **Escaping the digital**

The oversaturated virtual world has found people craving ‘real life’, tangible experiences. Xennials (born between 1977 and 1985) particularly have experienced a shift in digital culture, from growing up with limited technology, to now being immersed in social media. This has led to many more taking part in camping and other outdoor activities in a bid to step away from the screen and embrace the great outdoors (Wunderman Thompson, 2018). “In this digitally connected world, xennials are looking for more ways to disconnect. Nature immersion is becoming recognized for its key benefits to mental health (Wunderman Thompson, p67, 2018).”

With this more adventurous approach to life, how we use and interact with nature is changing (Wunderman Thompson, 2018). A new wave of

digital integration is essential and could present an alternative to completely stepping away from digital culture and instead synthesising it with nature. This is also suggested within the publication of *Problematic smartphone use, nature connectedness, and anxiety*, where it is stated that:

“A connectedness with nature must be part of a modern, increasingly urban lifestyle and therefore new technology must be embraced to engage people with nature. Indeed, there is emerging evidence that technology can be used to increase nature connectedness through immersive technologies” (Richardson, Hussain & Griffiths, para 8, 2018).

Even companies such as Amazon are recognising the need for nature integration, by including a 4,000-square-foot space of glass domes filled with plants at their Seattle headquarters to provide a tranquil green space in which employees can work and meet. This is increasingly important, as on average, people spend 90% of their time indoors, according to a May 2018 study by marketing research company YouGov for Velux. Companies are becoming well aware of the stresses of everyday life and are increasingly creating spaces that can make a difference to their consumers’ and employees’ overall well-being (Velux,2018). “Studies have suggested that embracing biophilic design can help to aid creativity and brain function, leading architects to be innovative with their use of natural materials and integration of plant spaces (Amazon, cited by Cogley, 2018).”

The Colour Garden Project, is another perfect example of how integrating nature is beneficial. Introduced in June 2016 at Leeds Industrial Museum, the community gardening and wellness group, welcomes its members to enjoy and maintain the gardens. The physical action of the gardening aids well-being in itself and proves that learning to look after plants can help in learning to look after oneself. The members also use it as a means to escape the hustle and bustle of the city.

As the garden is based at the Museum site which used to be an old textiles mill, they have taken this into consideration when choosing which plants to put in the garden. For example, Tansy produces different tones of yellow dyes, while Woad is grown for its leaves which are used as source of indigo. Moreover, Madder has been grown to produce red tones which can be extracted from the roots of the plants. The gardeners have tended to these plants

to then harvest and use them within other workshops (Hutchinson et al, 2019).

### Synergising the digital and natural

The synergy of digital and natural lifestyles is beginning to be recognised, by artists and businesses alike. Mileece Petre, a Sonic artist, uses the bio frequencies that plants emit to make music. These bio frequencies are recorded through electronic sensors, which then are passed through an amplifier. There is a different type of sensor she uses depending on whether or not she wants the sound to be constant or if she wants the plant to be interactive. By touching the leaves, she has more control over how the sounds work together.

By doing this she creates an immersive environment for herself as a creator. This kind of immersive interaction with nature is what I wanted my project to achieve, in how technology can be used in conjunction with it (Isaza,2014).

Figure 1: Lua smart plant pot (Lua, c.2020)



Lua is another company embracing the combination of natural and digital in the creation of an interactive plant pot, which aims to give house plants a sort of personality depending on how healthy they are. These plant pots are designed to link with an app, that allows you to track what your plant needs, whilst having a screen on the outside that animates. It can even be programmed to follow you around the room with its eyes (Lua, c.2020). However, I wanted my system to not only benefit the plant, but also the user.

The potential for being able to use nature as a vessel for social media is possible, in making it more tangible, real, reactive and stretching beyond the

screen. This gave me the idea of creating an interface which connects to plants and natural surroundings, that could feed into a more socially viable network of communication. This would have a resemblance with well-known social media networks, however, would limit virtual reactions based on how much interaction occurred between the user and nature. The possibility of limiting these interactions has the potential to make the user feel like they have really earned them, giving their likes and comments more weight and meaning.

### **METHODS: Designing a digital platform encouraging interaction with nature**

I met with technician Stephen Calcutt to discuss a similar project about the integration of technology and plants. He created a system that tracked a plant's 'feelings' and then made a twitter account that would tweet out words based on an algorithm previously created, but triggered by the plant's wellness.

Following this in depth talk I realised that it would take a vast knowledge of computer programming and electronics to put my system into action - which I do not have. However, I wanted to explore how it could potentially be used by learning about the sensors and processes that would be used in these circumstances. Therefore, I attended an Arduino workshop, held by Stephen himself, where we created a simple system using an LED light and a light sensor, with a USB connection to my computer as the power source.

### **Making sustainability more appealing through design**

The need for sustainability and the natural world to be repositioned in the market is key to the longevity of our planet and also our mental well-being. Marc Stoiber describes in his article *Making sustainability sexy, from an ad man's point of view*, that there is something lacklustre about the way in which sustainable and environmentally friendly practices are shown in advertising (Stoiber, 2005).

Egg, a Seattle based company, believe that we can't make sustainability more appealing if it's all about the greater good. Instead, the proposition has to be positioned to answer individual consumer needs (Egg, cited by Stoiber, 2005). Social media could be the key tool in this regard, providing a connection

on a broad scale, whilst integrating nature and encouraging people to make small changes to their daily routine in order to access it. It was key that the visual language for my system represented this, as it would need to nod to the natural whilst still appealing to the contemporary social media market.

Seachange, a New Zealand based design agency, created a new contemporary identity for waste management company Supertrash. Their aim as a company is to divert waste from landfills by employing circular solutions, with the ethos of re-using, re-purposing and recycling.

Figure 2: Supertrash by Seachange (BP&O, 2019)



The brand itself is youthful and innovative and uses a visual language which disrupts the usual associations with waste management and recycling, which are often awash with green. The use of a striking palette and an intriguing graphic device makes the brand feel more like an immersive fashionable lifestyle choice, rather than a daily chore. The slogan of 'Turning trash around' is mirrored in the circular spinning logo, a visual vernacular of protest which is reminiscent of 70s environmental movements and psychedelia. The animation itself represents the implementation of continual action, which makes the most out of a highly impactful brand that sparks intrigue and inquisition in the viewer (Baired, 2019).

The use of these alternative colours is something I considered in my design process. It was vital for my outcome to be smart and sharp and to stay clear of the greens and browns associated with nature and eco design. I also want it to appeal to the modern market of Instagram infused users,

whilst still being disruptive to their usual news feeds.

### **A sustainable approach to print: Seed paper and plant dyes**

As well as the digital system previously mentioned, it was important to consider the sustainability of the printed elements within the concept.

Anthony Burrill created a piece entitled 'Oil & Water Do Not Mix', which was made using crude oil extracted from the beach (Designboom, 2010). I relished the idea of not only creating thought provoking print, but of having it made of materials that represent the message or ideology behind it. If my system is promoting the natural, I needed to consider making everything as natural as possible and in an environmentally friendly way.

Printing sustainably is an important consideration for designers to make when creating their work - for example, considering what is going to happen to any given piece of print after use. Can it be recycled? Does it have another use? Using sustainable ink such as soy or flax is much better for the environment than using traditional methods, due to the low emission process used to make it. Furthermore, when the paper used comes to be recycled, it gives off far fewer toxic ingredients (ecoenclose, 2020). However, I wanted the printed material I chose to have an additional use, for example, being made into something else, passed on, or to provide an activity; not just being environmentally friendly.

In recent years, plant-able seed paper has become more popular in its use in greetings cards and gifts. This allows the gift to 'keep on giving' after it has been received, as when the paper is planted, the seeds that are encapsulated within it will grow. I felt the use of this kind of material would be valuable within the project, to allow any written information to also have an additional positive use after the information is consumed.

The manufacturing process of seed paper is done by hand and can be quite laborious. Many companies only use cotton and recycled fibres in the paper that they embed with seeds, making it ideal for eco campaigns. Due to the variable weight and surface of the seed paper, printing digitally may be problematic. It may be more effective to screen print

instead, however inconsistency might also provide an interesting outcome.

The creation of my own seed paper was an interesting process. With help of Ryan Durrant, I was able to use scraps of used paper to create my own recycled paper, in which I could embed leaves, flowers and seeds. These added elements gave the paper real depth and texture. However, due to the very manual techniques, some of the pieces were very fragile and therefore started to fall apart. For this kind of paper to be used on a large scale within the manufacturing of the printed element for the system, it would need to be made professionally, to enable effective printing and durability.

On the other hand, this paper did provide an excellent base for further experimentation, when making my own printing inks. I decided to keep the process as natural as possible using materials such as beetroot and turmeric to create the inks, as they contain strong and striking pigments without the need for artificial interference. I firstly boiled the beetroot to release the pigments, before blending and sieving. Once the solution was made I added in Manutex, which is a natural seaweed-based thickener enabling the beetroot liquid to be effectively used for screen printing. I then repeated the process for the turmeric.

Figure 3: Turmeric and beetroot inks (Author's image)

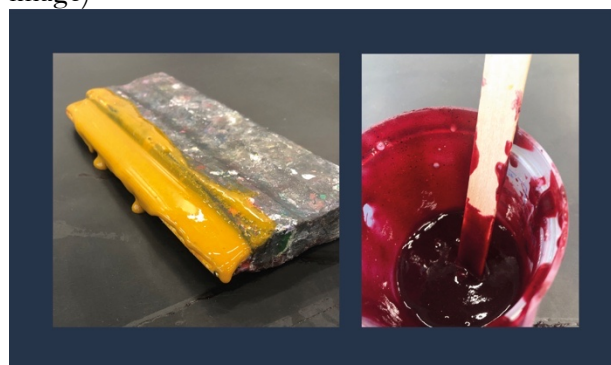
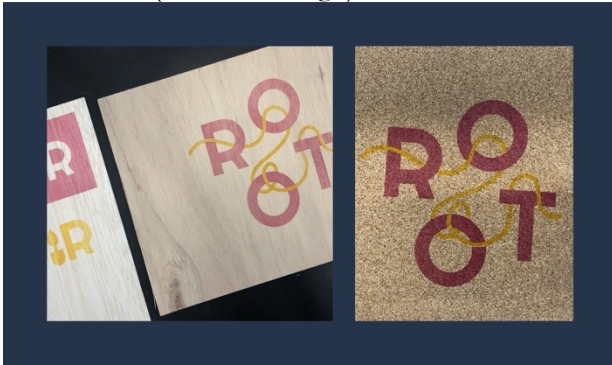


Figure 4: Print samples of logo development using natural inks (Author's image)



## Brand development

### *Visualising Connectivity*

Before progressing to the visuals, I needed to name the application. The name needed to represent connection, unity, nature and technology as well as being easily incorporated into our everyday lives. 'ROOT' implies all of this, along with the strength of a network all working together.

As part of my brand development I wanted to find ways of alluding to the connectivity that my app would allow, and therefore it was vital for the visual identity to mirror this. As I had already dismissed the leafy green and brown aesthetic, I wanted to find other ways of showing growth and connectivity. I experimented with crochet and used it as a means to repair some of the more fragile paper I had made earlier. Crochet is made by using a hook and yarn, where it is looped, pulled through and created in one continuous chain. I felt the logo should do the same to represent connection.

Figure 5: Crochet and seed paper (Author's image)



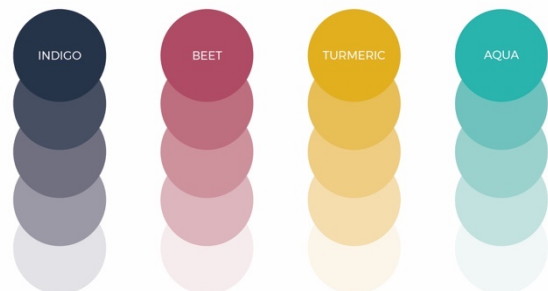
Crocheting the paper together would not work on a large scale but gave me the idea of making the typography in the logo connect.

Figure 6: ROOT logo (Author's image)



The colours seen within the project develop from my experiments with my inks along with indigo which is derived naturally from within Woad plant leaves, and also aqua to represent water.

Figure 7: Brand colour swatches (Author's image)



## The pack

An important part of the project is the pack that the plant tracking system will arrive in. The box design would be made from high quality recycled card, with eco-friendly lamination to provide longevity and further use, whilst still being easily recycled when it reaches the end of its life.

Within the pack, the plant tracker and informational 'pass it on' poster will be included. In the original design I planned on using half recycled and half seed paper, but eventually concluded that it would require further instruction such as how to effectively split the paper without compromising the elements.

I therefore decided to make the whole piece out of the same plant-able wildflower seed paper. Perforations between each section would allow the customer to rip off sections and pass on both a mini information pack and postcards to friends and family to inform them about the system. Not only will this give them a lovely piece of art to admire but enable them to absorb the information and then grow something beautiful for themselves. The wildflowers will also encourage bees, which aid pollination.

I created imagery inspired by natural landscapes. The initial design used one of my own photos of a hill in Staveley, Lake District to create a rotoscoped landscape, using multiple tones of my brand colours to provide a sense of depth whilst remaining simple. These posters are to serve as a reminder to embrace and enjoy the outdoors, whilst also being pleasant to look at and have within the home.

Special consideration was also given to the kind of plant that would be most appropriate for this kind of application. A Boston fern is highly effective at purifying the room and is also pet safe, making it a great option to have within people's homes.

Figure 8: Plant pack mock-up (Author's image)



Figure 9: 'Pass it on' seed paper poster mock-up:1 (Author's image) featuring Not enough plants (Austen, c.2020)



Figure 10: 'Pass it on' seed paper poster mock-up:2 (Author's image)

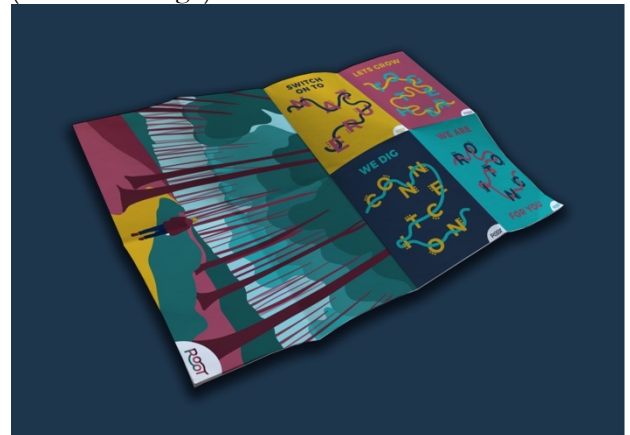


Figure 11: 'Pass it on' seed paper poster mock-up:3 (Author's image)



Figure 12: Tear away postcards - 1



Figure 13: Tear away postcards - 2



## The app

The idea behind the app is that it pulls together what I considered to be the best aspects from social media apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest, with the addition of the activity and plant trackers.

The app needed to be simple to use and have familiar gestures. I wanted the feed to be eye-catching yet also to give space for the focus to be on the outdoor activity that is being encouraged.

When connected to a living plant within the home, only when the plant is healthy can access to the social aspects of the app be granted. Interactions on the app are limited initially to four per day, intended to make conversations more thoughtful, meaningful and considered. These interactions can be increased depending on how much time the user spends outdoors.

The 'home feed' of the app features a filtering system, encouraging users to share images and posts about their outdoor adventures, gardening tips and plant progress, focusing much less on 'selfies'.

App pages:

Figure 14: Application icon (Author's image)



Figure 15: Application Pages (Author's image)



Figure 16: Opening pages (Author's image)

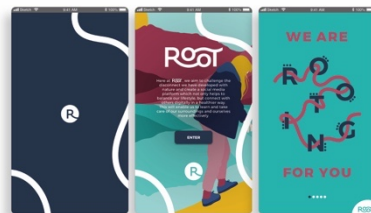




Figure 17: Welcome pages (Author's image)

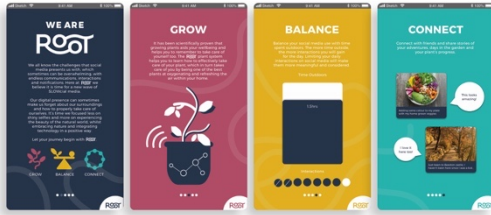


Figure 18: Account screens (Author's image)

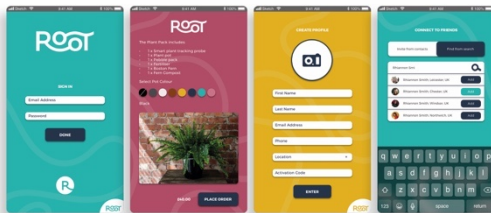


Figure 19: Main feed (Author's image)

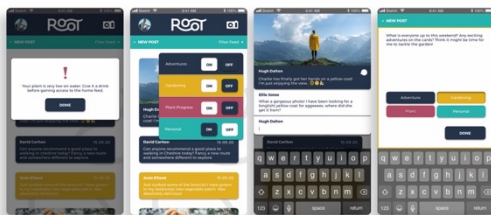


Figure 20: Plant tracking (Author's image)



Figure 21: Profile page (Author's image)



Figure 22: Activity tracker (Author's image)



Video of app in use can be viewed here:  
<https://vimeo.com/411760030>

## Discussion

Throughout this project, considerations were taken at every stage into how the *ROOT* app and accompanying printed material could be produced

in a way that would not only benefit the user, but also the environment.

Although screen printing every layer of the 'pass it on' poster may not be feasible due to costing and large scales needed, it does however highlight further considerations that could be made into how printed materials are used in the future, and whether they can be given an additional use after they have served their original purpose.

This kind of app could also change the way we use social media and connect with each other and our surroundings. It has the potential to do good, and have a positive impact on mental health and the environment, whilst still being pleasing to the eye.

## Conclusion

Encouraging people to step away from social media simply is not realistic and instead we must find ways to make it safer and more beneficial to the user. Adding a wellbeing section is not going to engage the user into controlling their use, instead it must be as easy as integrating social media into their life in the first place. Looking after oneself should not be a chore, but modern life can find a number of social media users succumbing to the pressures of appearing to have the perfect life on social networking platforms, meaning their own wellbeing gets pushed aside. Instead, real life and real experiences must be celebrated and encouraged. Applications like ROOT that consider the personal and environmental impacts from inception could provide us with a completely new means of digital interaction.

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