Not-So-Social Media

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During the last few weeks of my junior year of high school in Vienna, I frequented the *Nationalbibliothek* (national library) to study for final examinations. One Saturday afternoon, while walking back from the library to the tram station, Schottentor, I stopped at Starbucks for an iced caramel macchiato. With an oversized rucksack on my shoulder, a clear briefcase in one hand, and my dessert coffee in the other, I walked through the inner city of Vienna to reach Schottentor.

It was one of those days where you feel good about yourself, imagining that you look stylish and cosmopolitan. In fact, I paused to indulge in a round of selfies, and social media updates. I uploaded a picture of the signature Starbucks cup to the Instagram story and sent a selfie of myself drinking my coffee. In effect, I was advertising my smart look and thinking my friends might be impressed. Taking the escalator down to the tram station, I noticed that Schottentor, a transportation hub in the heart of Vienna, was as busy as could be. I sipped my coffee, humming my new favorite song, and staring at the blue sky dotted with fluffy clouds.

Among the sound of trams screeching to halt, and the conversations of many people, I heard some chuckling. And my gut told me they were chuckling at me. Wondering who was laughing, I looked around and spotted a group of four local teenagers—two girls and two boys no older than 14—pointing, laughing, and staring at me with their piercing blue eyes. With some cajoling from the boys, the girls came up to me. Doing their utmost to suppress their laughter, one of them asked, "*Können wir bitte deine Telefonnummer haben?*"

Now, a 14-year-old girl asking me for my phone number is just wrong and odd. So, I, in a tone slightly lower than my normal voice to lend it a little bit of gravity, replied "no," and inquired, "Why do you ask?"

One girl, with peroxide blonde hair and light blue eyes, replied with a heavy, Austrian accent, "Because we like Asian guys who have small eyes and penises." Before the she could even finish her sentence, the girls started laughing again. The two boys overheard the girls and also burst out laughing. I stared at them, appalled.

Stricken, I asked, "Why are you laughing?" They then told me their boyfriends told them to approach me, which didn't answer my question but apparently made them feel absolved. I felt completely humiliated.

After I had some time to process what had happened, I began to feel more angry than hurt. On my way back home in the tram, with the unfinished caramel macchiato in one hand, I mulled over what had happened to me at the centre of one of the supposedly most cultured cities in the world. I had always reminded myself of how lucky I was to live in Vienna, where racism is not as big a problem as in other countries. Europeans were supposed to be educated. Racism was not supposed to affect me until I went off to college in America.

Still piqued, I wrote a Facebook post. I needed to raise awareness, I told myself, and composed a careful and compelling statement. I told myself that the purpose of writing the post was quite simple: I wanted people to realize what I had to experience and let them feel my incredulity that this kind of thing happens in the 21ˢᵗ century. Many would agree with me, I thought. Surely people would be shocked by what happened and sympathize with me. They would comment heart-warming things to provide solace for me, I thought. So I continued typing, adding some creative allusions to my all-time favorite book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and alluding to other current issues like Donald Trump and Islamophobia in the United States. I sounded savvy. At the same time, I replied to my friends' Snapchat pictures, telling them and ranting about what had just happened to me.

I reviewed my draft, satisfied—self-satisfied, perhaps—and I pasted it into the "What's on your mind?" box on the very top of the Facebook page. After I inserted the text into the box, I tapped on the blue post button, and saw what was on my mind become instantaneously public. I had 800 or so Facebook friends at that point in my life, and that was the biggest audience to which I could make such a statement. I thought perhaps the post would inspire others to make insightful remarks about how racism should be confronted in modern society.

I did get some solace – but also, I didn't. One thing that I did not consider was the fact that the majority of the 800-people audience were people around my age. Had I expected too much from them?

One comment—"I'm so sorry you have a small penis."—apparently this is funny, so many people tapped a "like" on that comment, without realizing the devastating effect each "like" had on me. Under that comment, I saw a sub-comment, my friend trying to defend me, but it seemed pointless.

Another comment read, "A- (92/100) try harder next time." That also had several "likes". A guy who had bullied me throughout high school commented, "That's awful. :(Get better soon." It was obvious this comment did not mean what it said.

On my side of the screen, I was grief-stricken by the things these people – my presumed friends – were willing to say across the barrier of a computer screen. Then I started to wonder what might it be like to be on the receiving end of my post? Were they even thinking before they spat these words out? Would they say this without the screen between us? Would they be able to tell me everything they said to my face? They weren't even really responding to me.

The truth is, they were all seeking validation. Each "like" they received functioned as a means of approval, another gold star. Concerned with social standing, they let their desire to be validated inspire ruthless comments that they wouldn't ever likely speak in person, but which seemed perfectly acceptable on social media.

Later that night, I received a message through Facebook from a ninth-grader: "You attention seeking retard." I asked him, "What do you mean?" He replied, "You made up this shit for

likes. There is no way this happened in Austria. You only did this for the likes." And, of course, that hurt me too.

But here's the difficult, dismaying thing I've been wrestling with as I reflect on this: what if that last cruel response was in some sense true? What if I was also, in a way, seeking approval from the people I liked to call "friends?" What if I was only using what I had experienced as leverage for writing a post on Facebook, seeking solace, yes, but also—in the performance of my indignation—approval? Maybe I wasn't so very different from the cruel responders to my post, desperately seeking likes as a means of social validation.

I guess we are all seeking validation, whether it is through a post, a comment, or a picture. This is one factor that causes social media to invite such cruelty. People respond to the words on the screen, not the person behind the screen who wrote them. They want validation themselves. Ultimately, it's easy for people to hurt others and to be hurt through social media, as individuals blinded by their desire for validation will say anything to notch a few more likes.

Reading the Facebook post and mulling over the thoughts that might have gone through my head when I was writing the post, I now cringe. In that moment, sipping on my overpriced caramel macchiato, all I aimed to achieve through the post was validation. Though I had gone through something genuinely painful, I turned it into a commodity, using it to elicit pity, while performing intelligence, hoping for a slew of likes, a slew of gold stars. Instead, maybe I got what I deserved. And maybe next time, before I indulge in Snapchat or a righteously indignant post on Facebook, I'll think twice.