



Social Media and its Impacts on Human Relationships

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Abstract

A simple look at some of the more prominent advantages and disadvantages of social media leads to a greater knowledge of the far reaching implications for human relationships. The impacts on human relationships are discussed, concluding that the questions we need to be asking more is how to mitigate some of the more pernicious effects.

Keywords: social media, impacts, human relationships, relations, advantages, disadvantages

“I am truly grateful to have grown up pre-internet!” Tracy Dumais, British Council, Bangkok, (FB Communication 9 May 2021) Those of us who grew up pre-internet lived without the overload of too much information, and had more time to spend on other activities. The internet also opened up our world, bringing with it many advantages. This paper focuses on several of the positive and negative effects that have accompanied these developments.

To paraphrase Wikipaedia, social media are interactive technologies for creating and sharing information and ideas. They can also be used as ‘forms of expression’ on virtual community platforms and networks. It is not the purpose of this paper to challenge such definition of social media, but to point out that social media is now an essential part of modern society, and is here to stay. Therefore, there will be a need to start taking a closer look at mitigating some of the more damaging effects, because a common element of all social media systems is that they affect, and are affected by, the relationships that their users are involved in (Butler and Matook, 2014). Mushba Said (2016) concurs, stating that social media are an intrinsic part of relationships, which have changed the way that we interact with one another; how we perceive one another; how we behave with one another (Mushba Said, (2016).

This paper refers to human relationships in very general terms. Future research could focus on impacts on any of the many categories of relationships. Social media are used



for numerous reasons, by all kinds of people. Relationships might mean intimate relationships between marriage partners or girlfriend/boyfriends; families; (estranged or even in the same house); extended families; or people looking for romantic relationships or friendships. The list is infinite, before we even start thinking about business and professional; social; platonic; acquaintances; trans-national; national; and international. Each are impacted variously by a wide range of social media.

The pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on human relationships, and complicated the impacts of social media enormously. To keep focus on the impacts of social media, this important point has not been addressed, being outside the scope of this paper.

Examples of social media include WhatsApp, Instagram, Line, Tinder, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and Facebook. It could perhaps also be defined as 'social networking', or 'social communication'.

Social media has bought enormous advantages to individuals, groups, and organisations, especially businesses. Some of the more notable advantages are mentioned first.

Advantages

1. Social media enables people to communicate rapidly through texting, and is a popular form of communication. Everybody can participate with their opinions (on Twitter) at the same time. (Hzerraiz 30 January 2015). Communications of such immediacy from all corners of the world is a huge advantage in terms of human relationships.

2. It is easy for people with common interests to find one another - hikers, knitters, book reading groups, hobbyists and groups of all kinds - can now arrange meet-ups and events, and also publicise easily on their chosen form(s) of social media.. Short-notice changes can be advertised, and new locations immediately given. Cotter (2015) adds that this can lead to the planning of events in the real world, which in turn means that more people are able to participate, and serves to connect people who otherwise may have never interacted “by broadening the circles within which people interact it can help to facilitate new relationships that evolve into the real world.”

3. Social media have very strong positive impacts on businesses, who can buy, sell, market, and PR their products and services. Importantly, it is easy for customers to give



feedback, which in theory leads to improved products and services, because the businesses can respond to the feedback more easily, and with Public relations intrinsically tied in with human relationships, this is an important point.

4. Video teleconferencing, using applications such as Zoom and Google Meet. As a university teacher of monastics, I have found this form of social media to be one of the most advantageous. The level of my students’ university skills have improved markedly through their access to Internet and through the vast amounts of research now available to them. A particular issue with monastic students is their difficulty with connecting and communicating with one another outside of the classroom, because they live in monasteries scattered around the city of Chiang Mai. Since Zoom arrived eight years ago in 2012, my 4th year Public Relations (PR) students have been able to have regular Zoom meetings in their student ‘business’ groups, meeting once a week on Zoom from their respective monasteries, and can submit meeting notes with up-to-date accounts of their weekly (desktop) PR activities’.

5. Similarly, individuals living in remote areas can now take part in group meetings and events online, and can build working and social relationships that they would not otherwise have been able to do.

6. Another enormous advantage for human relationships is that people can easily connect and communicate with friends and family round the world within a split second; bringing estranged family members together at the click of a mouse. Videos, photos and messages can also easily be sent.

Disadvantages

Discussions stemming from the continued growth of social media are often concerned with the decrease of interpersonal relations and all problems deriving from it (Zayat, 2018). The disadvantages are considerable, with perhaps the most noticeable negative impact being the loss of personal interactions that have switched to online.

1. Social media is referred to by Kendi, (2020) as “A large group of peoples’ means of digital communication to share information...”. She suggests that social networking may have a very detrimental effect on human interactions. She refers to the addictive tendency of social media, and suggests it is just as addictive as drugs. “Among children as well as adults, this type of addiction is rampant”, she argues. She refers to an (unreferenced) Harvard study



that shows that one's brain lights up through one's social media network just like drug users will.

2. Loss of 'real-world interaction between friends. There is ample anecdotal evidence of groups of youngsters and couples ordering food together in restaurants sitting at the same table, but playing on their phones and ignoring one another, with minimal direct face-to-face communication - verbal or otherwise. Butler and Matook (2014) concur, arguing that social media create weakened inter-personal relationships, and that "social media enabled online relationships can displace and damage offline interaction and relationships". They refer to earlier studies of social media forums of the 1980 and 90s who found that while social media enabled online relationships, they were poor substitutes for live relationships, and created, for example situations where family relationships in households were weakened. They also found higher levels of depression and loneliness. However, later studies suggested less evidence of such negative effects, indicating conversely, that there are various ways in which online and offline relationships complement one another. This would be an interesting research focus for further study, especially as significant amounts of time are now spent online during the pandemic, and referrals to mental health specialists are at an unprecedented high.

3. Restriction of non-verbal communication when online. Cotter (2015) 'rampages.us (social media and human relationships, refers to studies that show approximately 7% of all communication is based on written or verbal words, and that the remaining 93% is reliant on body language. This is an important point as a university teacher to Public Speaking fourth year undergraduates, having to teach online because of the pandemic, has made teaching body language particularly difficult. In the classroom, a teacher teaches body language through example, and, showing the difference between a powerful posture and unconfident body language proves somewhat difficult to do online. Nevertheless, a switch from body language to focusing on facial expressions for online video conferencing works well in this Zoom class.

4. Non verbal communication expressing rapport and connection between individuals is essential for human relationships. Susan Tardanico (2012) purports that "our only real method of connection is through authentic communication". She discusses a young college student who had attempted suicide, but through positive statements, accompanied by emoticons of smiles and hearts had convinced her mother that all was OK. " Tardanico goes on to point out that " ... anyone can hide behind the text, the email, the Facebook post or the tweet, projecting any image they want and creating an illusion of their choosing." Non



verbal cues are essential, without which, meaning can be misinterpreted, missed or lost. Similarly, the loss of body language, which affects all inter-personal communication goes right across the social media board, so communications are wide open to miss-understandings and misinterpretations.

5. Thus the accompanying disadvantage - or “unprecedented paradox” in Tardianico’s words, is that despite the powerful social technologies available, on the one hand we are more connected, but potentially even more disconnected than ever before. Indeed, 93% of our communication context is stripped away (Tardianico, 2012). How then, are we supposed to develop human relationships beyond the superficial level, and make decisions, which are often based on short incomplete phrases, abbreviated words, and the rest on smileys, stickers and emoticons?

6. Tardianico concludes with the most pertinent of questions, which is ‘How do we communicate effectively and build deeper, more authentic relationships when we have only words (truncated at best) instead of voice, face and body expressions to get all the important and powerful nuances that often belie the words?’ This would be an excellent topic for future research, which is all the more relevant to the prevalence of social media in a pandemic-ridden world.

This paper has outlined some of the positive and negative effects of social media, and while the negative effects are far reaching, social media has become an intrinsic part of our lives. As already stated, the important point is how to mitigate some of the more prevalent negative impacts, which is an apt topic for future research. Indeed, if the situation is addressed effectively, it can mean we can continue to exploit the benefits of social media - but we need to tackle the negative impacts on human relationships head on.



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