**How Has Social Media Redefined What It Means to be Sociable?**

**Abstract:** It is time for us to retire the rumour that social media will be the end of fully developed social skills and replace physical social interactions. One of the main purposes so many people use social media platforms is to augment, facilitate and supplement real life communication. Social media maintains strong social ties with our existing friendship circle, diversifies and expands our social networks, alongside giving more people to opportunity to become more sociable than ever before. Social media platforms has strengthened social interactions in the public sphere and affected younger generations social identities by expanding social networks, facilitating real life interactions and creating stronger social ties with each other, redefining traditional ideologies of what it means to be sociable.

**How Has Social Media Redefined What It Means to be Sociable?**

Social media has revolutionised communication and what it means to be social. Previously to the digital age, many would define a social interaction as communication with a real life physical presence. However, as we continue to progress into this technological era this idea of social relations has begun to transform into a hybrid of face to face communication and online interactions. Social media enhance one’s social network through multiple platforms that allow users to connect through shared pieces of their identity and life. The platforms enable around the clock connections to family, friends, work colleges and other people that have crossed one’s life, sustaining social ties with individuals even when they are not physically with the person.

Nevertheless, when you type social media into the internet thousands of articles with negative connotations will pop up, blaming the networking sites for inflicting a world of narcissism, addiction and mental health issues upon our society. However, it is the isolation that is forced onto social media users and the damage on social skills that has been a present concern since the early days of the digital world. When in fact if we take a step back and look at how we socialise as a community in the 21st century, it is almost completely facilitated through social networking sites. The digital advances in social media allow individuals to connect on a global scale, communicate through safe environments, expand social networks and increase social opportunities. Using social media can no longer be considered as only a social activity, as technology is no longer something you use to fill in for time. There continues to be a fragmented definition on what a true social life is supposed to look like, as many continue to reject the validity of social media relations. However, this just shows signs of a regressive mind set. We have clearly transformed into this technology-inclusive society, therefore our traditional ways of life, including our social relations need to update for us to continually progress into this future. Social media platforms has strengthened social interactions in the public sphere and affected younger generations social identities by expanding social networks, facilitating real life interactions and creating stronger social ties with each other, redefining traditional ideologies of what it means to be sociable.

**Social Media Facilitates Real Life Interactions**

It is an age old (but not that old) myth that since the introduction of technologies, such as mobile phones and tablets, alongside the creation of social media, the younger generations have become increasingly anti-social. A reoccurring idea that if someone is engaged with digital device that they are in fact disconnected from the world around them. Wrong. If anything, one of social medias greatest features is that it facilitates real life interactions. Through the ability to interact globally, alongside social platforms that connect people through location, interests and mutual friends it had become easier than ever to bridge social ties. Results from studies on the effect of social media on social networks showcase that point, that social media is eliminating social isolation. In particular, a study by Burke, Marlow and Lento (2010) on college students saw that participants with greater social media use had experienced reduced loneliness. Additionally, a comparative study on high school students from 1978 – 2012 by Griffith University and the University of Queensland, saw that the young adults of the 21st century were feeling less isolated than those of their predecessors. This research suggests that the younger generations relationship with technology has led them to become more social adept in terms of their ability to connect with others.

A paper by Jung highlights his fears that too much energy and time spent on online interactions is taking precious time and focus off maintaining real life connections. He believes that a social platforms purpose is to distract the individual from reality, in a digital world where no “real social ties are being made”. Jung summarises by suggesting that social interaction can only be considered meaningful if it is performed in real life environments. Jung fails to see the world in this new technological progressive light where both online and physical interactions should be recognised as having the same meaningful impact upon social relations. As mentioned before, many physical social interactions would never have been made without the facilitation of social networking platforms. Whether someone is messaging you on Facebook to grab a coffee, or checking Snapchat maps to see your location to hang out, they continue to help connect and create conversation between each other. This is seen as combining “various communication medias together”, which individuals constantly partake in, and this connects to their personal networks (Boase, 2008). The communication through different social networks is not considered as one personal communication system rather than as separate social worlds (Boase, 2008). This communication offline and online both have a substantial amount of impact on ones online and offline social relations.

Another common concern is that through the constant use of social networks there is potential that it will distract people from receiving those face-to-face interactions. However, social media supplements and even enhances real life interactions rather than displace it. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have a key purpose to connect friends and encourage that real-life communication. Facebook for example, can send you online invitations to social events, and allow direct messaging where you can organise to hang out in person with friends. Social media has become a tool that enables us to discover and reconnect with friends and be immediately updated with their lives since you were last in touch. Pew Research Centre stated that “more than eight-in-ten social media-using teens say social media makes them more connected to information about what is happening in their friends’ lives and 70 percent say these social platforms better connect them to their friends’ feelings” (2015). This kind of instant connection and discovery would have never happened if it was not for the introduction of networking sites. Many applications encourage online conversations that are followed up by a face to face interactions. Social media platforms Tinder and Skout encourage local singles to interact online, converse through the apps to build their connection and then meet in face to face. Additionally, ‘Nexercise’ a fitness based app brings like-minded and health conscious people together to communicate, discuss and build friendships. It also suggests local gym classes, cooking tutorials and other health events in your area, in hopes to encourage that face-to-face social ties. Real life communication is still incredibly important, and social media is not trying to replace it but supplement and encourage those face-to-face interactions. Social media communication does not damage ones social skills as it reflects a similar socialising style of offline interactions. Social media aids the maintenance of relationships, while supplementing “relationships in between face-to-face engagements, coordinated plans, and connect online amidst physical and geographic barriers” (Davis, 2018). This reiterates that social media does not induce anti-social behaviour, but in most cases strengthens real life social ties.

**Expanding Social Networks**

Our social networks are growing at a rapid rate, and as a result are becoming more diverse thanks to the use of social media. Social media supplies users with little snippiest of activity and actions of their friends and acquaintances lives that help them maintain a direct connection. In particular, social media plays a crucial role in how the younger generations interact with the world and others. According to the Pew Research Centre, 88% of young adults use social media, with Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat being the most common platforms for communicating with their social networks. They use the social platforms to create stronger social ties with their existing friends, as more than “nine in ten teens say they spend time with friends on social media” (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Some believe that the networking sights are in fact distracting individuals from building social relations in the physical world (Wegmann, Stodt & Brand, 2015). However, according to a study by Ellison, Lampe and Steinfield on under-graduate college students, the use the social media site, Facebook positively correlated to maintaining and deepening existing social relationships (2007). These platforms that share up to date information of our activity almost act as a social lubricant for real life relationships, as it provides topics of conversation, key information on friends and highlights shared interests to ease social interactions with other (Farfan, 2013).

Social media is not only a great tool for maintaining strong connections with friends, but an amazing platform for discovering new social ties at a global scale that would have never been achievable without the networking sites. In a study on young adults, the use of Facebook increased their social diversity, as it had a positive link to forming new relationships. The results suggested that this influenced their psychological state, as it showed “greater benefits for users experiencing low self-esteem and low life satisfaction” levels (Ellison, Lampe & Steinfield, 2007). Social media enables users to get to know new friends at a faster rate than in real life through their online activity, allowing users to become more comfortable and build stronger connections. In 2015, almost 64% of teenagers that had made a new, was performed through the use of social networking sites. Additionally, two-thirds of teens share their social media usernames and profiles as their first point of communication with new friends.

These online platforms continue to connect people synchronously and asynchronously, which allows individuals to diversify their social networks (Boase, 2008). Social media affords network diversity through its direct and mediated access to social interaction even when the participation is in local social settings (Hampton, Lee & Her, 2011). Prior to social media, we would meet new people by simply being at the right place at the right time, however due to the networking platforms we have access to greater and more direct communication. Social media has given us individuals the opportunity for some real personal growth as we can passively “share the lives of people we know on Facebook and other social platforms” (Reynolds, 2017). Video blogger Gary Tuck made a comment that the “media we call social is anything but … we open our computers, and it is our doors we shut”. The physical door may be shut, but social media platforms have just opened a multitude of doors for online social interactions that one could never achieve in their outside environment alone.

**Effects of Social Media On individuals**

“Human nature craves human interaction, and that interaction cannot be effectively replaced by technology” Hampton stresses this point in her paper on the importance of social interaction for children (2014). Social media is not trying to replace but facilitate and aid face to face interactions. It is true that social media is not only handled by adults, many young children are interaction over the internet on a daily basis. The networking platforms have a large effect on the social lives of children, that no previous generations would have experienced when growing up. However, these new generations of children will not be lacking crucial steps in the development of their social skills, in fact they might as well be the most social connected generation we have ever had.

A study on the effect of Social Media on children’s development saw that its networking actually “helps kids build their own identity and begin to establish social ties with online friends” (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). Social media has enabled children who have a hard time socialising in person create friends online, expand friendship circles and strengthen their real-life connections. To believe that social networking will have a negative effect on the development of children’s social skills is narrow-minded and conservative thinking as we continue to progress into this technology-inclusive society.

Personality from the offline to the online world does not change drastically. For example, a study by Teresa Correa et al. discovered that users “appear to extend their offline personalities into the domains of online social networks” (2010). Their study reiterated that people are not replacing “one form of interaction with another” but continue interaction patterns when transitioning from the digital and physical. However, this does mean that people who are quiet and not as sociable offline, do reflect a similar personality when online. However, these media platforms do consistently courage social interactions but it is important to note that it is not the medium that is making them less sociable, it is just reflecting their existing style of social interaction. It can be incredibly overwhelming to live in a world that relies a lot on social interactions, when you suffer from mental health issues such a social anxiety. This anxiety makes live very difficult for certain individuals as they find it hard to initiate and establish social interactions. Social media takes away this emotional exhaustion and nervous state that these people experience in real life, as they experience more control over their social situations and build social ties at a pace they are comfortable with.

**Conclusion**

It is time for us to retire the rumour that social media will be the end of fully developed social skills and replace physical social interactions. One of the main purposes so many people use social media platforms is to augment, facilitate and supplement real life communication. Social media maintains strong social ties with our existing friendship circle, diversifies and expands our social networks, alongside giving more people to opportunity to become more sociable than ever before. The use of social media has strengthened our relationship as a society with social relations, redefining what it means to be social in the 21st century by creating a new generation that is more connected than ever before.

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