

The fundamental changes in how digital users form and engage in social relationships on social media has negative consequences in offline relationships and well-being.

Abstract:

This paper covers the issues which have arisen from social media's role in the modern world in forming and engaging in social relationships and how this impacts offline relationships and well-being. The writing focuses on issues in communication, identity, perceptions of relationships and the changing landscape of intimacy at the hands of social networks. The paper outlines the fundamental changes that have occurred and explains how this impacts users offline in forming meaningful relationships. It identifies the long-term problems a lack of change could bring on social and intimate relationships and mental health. It argues that, particularly for the sake of future generations, there needs to be a massive overhaul in how we manage social media's impact on relationship making and intimacy. The paper takes from research in the fields of social media and digital communities and presents strong points about a need for change in what is now ingrained practice. The research presents a cautious approach to the study of social media and its impact on our relationships and well-being. It can be useful in understanding how social media has re-shaped basic relationship building practices in our lives and ask questions about the sustainability of these changes.

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Social media has completely reshaped how its users create and maintain social relationships. These changes have negatively impacted how social media users manage their relationships and well-being in offline spaces. This paper analyses how social media and the surrounding digital communities are affected by a distinct lack of focus on offline skills and practices. Changes in communication practices including identity formation, relationship management and intimate life have contributed to a number of harmful consequences for social media users on social communications. The erosion of person-to-person communication skills and growing confusion about identity and perceptions of relationships in online spaces impacts on users when engaging in offline social settings. This also affects the formation of intimate relationships with online dating communities challenging understandings of intimacy. These issues need to be addressed before society becomes even more ingrained with social media and is a key to current and future generations' relationships and well-being.

Before social media became an everyday tool for people to form and engage in social relationships, friendships and intimate relationships grew through shared experiences, interests and intimacies based on personal presence and direct communications. Communications were usually verbal, including facial and body language. Three significant changes in the way people communicate on social media: the form of communications; its lack of intimacy; and its superficiality; have brought about a sharp decline in the communication skills needed to form meaningful relationships in the offline world. The form of social media communications involves no physical presence and is mainly non-verbal. It includes images, GIFs, videos, and little or no text. It is not spontaneous but

mediated, with users considering, creating and reviewing their posts before they make them. While these are important communications skills for social media, they are not the skills needed in offline relationships where people must speak and use words meaningfully without computer mediation. People improve their skills and communications through practice. With an estimated 18 million Australian social media users (Kemp, 2020) honing their social media skills, rather than practicing and improving the verbal communication skills they need in offline relationships, there are causes for concern for relationship building in the offline world.

Secondly, social media creates a lack of intimacy which is fundamental to forming offline relationships. It involves broadcasting information to a group of 'friends', who can then share it with their communities. Turkle (as cited in Nordness 2015 p.2) argues that social media is draining intimacy due to the lack of privacy involved in broadcasting our lives. Users are relying on computer-mediated communication to create a feeling of intimacy, rather than true intimacy created by offline communication practices. In addition, rather than sharing intimate details in a one-on-one setting, social media users are communicating these details to everyone which Nordness (2015 p.2) describes as removing the significance and personability of communication. The mass communication element of social media also affects social presence. Hampton (2016 p.103) outlines how person-to-network communication results in limited social presence due to the broadcasting of a whole range of personal content. Trust, sharing of confidences and honesty are essential elements for intimacy in offline relationships. Social media's lack of, or false intimacy erodes the person-to-person skills needed to have meaningful offline relationships. It blurs the lines of intimacy in ways that challenge whether users even understand the concept. This does not set them up well in the offline world.

Finally, social media communications are raising a generation of shallow communicators and relationships, which Wang et al. (2014 p.230) describe as "superficial, shallow and short-lived." Social media allows users to present their ideal selves. Rather than communicating the full story, social media users filter their lives and showing only what they want to. None of this is possible in offline relationships, where what you see is what you get, with little room for filtering or hiding. Social media gives people a platform to present unrealistic representations of themselves, which can be incredibly detrimental in building and maintaining social relationships in offline spaces, due to a lack of depth or confidence in their real self. Overall, personal communication practices are being affected by the rise of social media across a multitude of issues which in turn is detrimental to social relationships. It also creates a whole new perception of social relationships and identity, which do not align with the reality of offline relationships.

Most people have social media 'friends' who are barely acquaintances in the pre-digital sense. Online friendship is verified in different ways depending on the platform. By 'friending' or 'following' someone, social media is solidifying online 'friendships.' Miller et al. (2016 p.108) discuss online relationships as an "official verification." Rather than communicating and relating to each other in the offline world, social media makes users believe that friendship is verified by social media and not by communication, trust and honesty. Rather than knowing who your friends are through social interaction and strong

connections, social media requires relationships to be broadcast and certified. This redefining and verification process does not align with what friendships are and how they are validated offline.

The blurring of online and offline identity on social media can also cause users issues with offline friendships. Users must live up to the online persona they have built which can cause issues in offline contexts. Not only do users have to maintain this identity, they have to present it to friends who may know them outside social media and who don't see this as a true representation. Lima et al. (2017 p.10) discuss the need for caution in living a "second-life" through social media identity in regard to friendships. This caution arises from the blurring of offline and online identities and how that affects relationships. As social media continues to influence users' perceptions of relationships and identity, their understandings about these vital relationship issues and the skills they need to form meaningful relationships will continue to falter. Social media has not only created these challenges and uncertainty in non-sexual relationships, but these issues are also evident in the online foundation and structure for sex and romantic love.

While intimacy is important to social relationships, social media has taken people's desire for intimacy to another level. As a form of social media (Licoppe, 2019 p.87), dating apps such as Tinder and Bumble enable people to initially search for and form intimate relationships online before personal interaction occurs. These apps have caused a massive change in the process of romance and how intimate relationships are formed. A dating platform that offers endless choices of partner, with a photograph and bio, and lets you get to know them before meeting them may sound like a good idea to the pre-digital generations, who had to rely on meeting someone in their everyday lives. However, the reality shows that negative consequences arise for dating app users in offline relationships, relating to identity, motivation and security.

Dating apps allow users to engage in online relationships with few boundaries. Users can present themselves however they like. Their dating identity can be quite different to their real identity, or even false. These problems were less prevalent in traditional offline dating contexts due to the initiation of relationships from person-to-person communication. Turizo (2018, p.38) discusses Tinder users using the app as a way to explore a separate identity to their offline one. Building an offline relationship where there is identity misrepresentation online presents challenges for both parties – one has to sustain or admit the lie, and the other has to confront issues of trust and honesty which are integral to intimate relationships. This can be incredibly damaging for offline relationship building.

User motivations on dating apps range widely (Ward, 2016 p.1649). Many seek real, strong connections that lead to an intimate offline relationship. Others use it for amusement. Ward (2016 p.1650) describes dating apps as a "game" to some users. Rather than forming strong, meaningful relationships online and strengthening these offline, people use these platforms for amusement, motivated by reasons such as creating feelings of self-worth or simply wasting time for entertainment (Ward, 2016 p. 1649). There are also others who use the anonymity of these apps to abuse and degrade women. Licoppe's (2019 p.83) "Tinder Nightmares" discusses females' reporting of aggressive and sexual encounters online with men. He also describes forums where men post their conversational successes with women

as a kind of masculinity contest. Where motivations collide, once the conversations and emotions move offline there will be challenging experiences for those ultimately looking for a meaningful intimate relationship. In some cases, there will be serious risks. Experiences like being 'played' by someone for their entertainment or being abused by someone because they can, erode confidence and trust on and offline, severely impacting a user's ability to have strong offline relationships. For the other party, these behaviours generate unrealistic and often unsafe representations of what dating transitions into in offline spaces, where the behaviour would not be tolerated. It blurs understandings of what is normal and tolerated in offline social contexts. This is harmful to both male and females and creates uncertainty about what offline intimacy should and does look like. With Iqbal (2021) reporting that the majority of Tinder users are aged 18-24 with over half that U.S demographic using the app, these young adults enter the dating world, with dating apps shaping their ideas about intimate relationships. Issues of identity, motivation and the risks of dating apps present significant challenges and cause ongoing effects in the development of intimacy in future generations.

Central to all of these negative consequences is the impact they have on building meaningful social and intimate relationships offline. Offline relationships are essential for human health and well-being. Lima et al. (2017 p.20) identifies serious mental health issues associated with the lack of effort being put into offline relationships and stresses the importance of maintaining offline relationships as an integral part of good mental health. This is due to the internal gratification that only face-to-face and verbal cues can give us. The insignificance of a 'like' or 'retweet' compared to a smile or a hug explains why the focus must be re-oriented back to offline relationships. The high rate of social media use by children raises serious concerns about the next generation's ability to build offline relationships, and their mental health. Chaffey (2021) reports that 21% of 8–11-year-olds have a social media profile which jumps to 71% in 12–15-year-olds. These children, who Miller (2016 p.100) describes as "digital natives", were born into a digital world where they are forced to adopt digital technologies in growth, learning, entertainment and communication without absorbing key skills needed to survive and thrive in offline spaces.

As a result, reports indicate mental health issues arising from children's reliance on social media are having a huge impact. Appel et al. (2019 p.61) warn that those born after 2000 who have grown up with social media are "on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades." Scholars such as Odaci & Kalkan (2010 p. 1092) back this up by pointing out the loneliness and shyness to which young people using the Internet and social media are susceptible to. When mental health starts to play a part in our relationship with social media, the warning signs need to be addressed. With this in mind, society needs to return to focusing on non-computer mediated communication and relationships whilst working on the vital skills that are needed to function and thrive in the offline world. At very least, this is vital for future generations who have no choice in being born into the digital world.

The changes that have occurred since social media has become ingrained into modern life is responsible for a number of negative consequences in how we engage, form and manage offline relationships and well-being. The decimation of person-to person communication skills has had a massive impact on how users operate in offline spaces. In addition, the

blurring of identity in social media spaces has left users confused about their offline identity and how they fit in outside the confines of the digital world. This is having a direct effect on users' perceptions of relationships and how they form and manage them. Dating apps have compounded these issues by confusing users' understanding of intimacy and how to manage intimacy once it moves from behind a screen. It is also incredibly harmful for users who are learning unsustainable and unsafe practices through the online nature and perceived anonymity of these apps. As social media users navigate the confusing and uncertain landscape of these apps, there is a clear lack of focus on how these apps are affecting us offline although studies establishing the mental health consequences are very clear. There needs to be a change in the balance between social media and offline relationships, to allow offline relationships to thrive. The digital generation has let their offline relationships and well-being slip due to their captivation with social media. It is now up to them to find a balance and make sure future generations aren't exposed to the negative consequences of social media causes for offline relationships and well-being.

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