

The Impacts of Virtual Social Interactions on the Human Society

Virtual social interactions, different from face-to-face interactions, take place on the internet, where different users from across the world socialize and connect with online communities. This paper will be discussing the most common type of online platform for virtual social interactions: social media.

In the past decade, social media use has skyrocketed, replacing traditional face-to-face interactions by a large percent. According to the APA, while only 5% of adults in the US uses social media platforms in 2005, that percentage has grown now to 70% (Allen). It is undeniable that virtual social interactions are quickly replacing face-to-face social interactions. So, how would social media impact us, our relationships, and the entire human society?

Generally, I would share a negative view on the long-term effects of virtual social interactions on the human society (after acknowledging its advantage) for three main reasons: the need for deep authentic relationships, psychological problems and the emotional growth of teenagers, and data control and cyberbullying issues.

Quick & Easy Bonds

The primary advantage of virtual social interactions is that it's quick and easy to create bonds with other people. The speed of the internet allows immediate checkups or conversations with friends, anywhere, at any time. This makes social media users feel more connected with friends' lives and emotions. According to a survey conducted around 2014 to 2015, a staggering 83% of teenagers say that social media makes them more connected with their friends' lives, while 69% report feeling more connected to their friends' emotions (Lenhart). It is evident that virtual social interaction platforms allow teenagers especially to be more connected with the lives and emotions of their friends.

To amplify the effect, social media connects people with similar passions, who may never meet face to face because of geographical barriers, through learning classifier algorithms. According to Patrick OConnell, a writer on Medium, social media not only connects people through creating communities, clubs, forums and other online groups, but also by amplifying fandoms and subcultures, providing online

professional networking and creating opportunities for knowledge exchange in particular fields (OConnell). This makes social media an excellent platform for people with similar hobbies to interact and build bonds with one another.

Lack of Deep & Authentic Relationships

The speed, ease and freedom that social media brings come at the cost of the deep and authentic friendships that only face-to-face interactions can provide.

The root of the problem with virtual social interactions lies with its anonymity. On the internet, people are anonymous. The only information people checking in to see will be the profile photo and perhaps a brief introduction. Therefore, there are no social cues to follow, no immediate consequence after posting hurtful comments, and no need to be respectful and honest towards others. However, this lack of respect and dishonesty leads to shallower and easier to be broken relationships.

Deep authentic relationships are built on mutual respect, transparent communication, and empathy. With the anonymity of the internet, however, people often tend to be more dishonest and show different sides of themselves on the internet. A survey on the relationships of teenagers in social media suggest that a staggering 77% of teenagers in the study agree that people are “less authentic and real on social media than they are offline” and 85% agree that people “get to show different sides of themselves on social media that they cannot show offline” (Lenhart). Knowing how people can be dishonest on the internet, people tend to be less trusting on social media. According to a 20-country survey conducted in November 2022, only six in ten internet users say that they trust the internet, a severe decline from 2019 (Simpson). This causes online relationships to be shallower and weaker than face-to-face ones.

The lack of the up-and-downs in real life is another key reason in the shallower relationships that virtual social interactions provide. According to Jerry and Mary White’s book *To Be a Friend: Building Deep and Lasting Relationships*, “indelible connections of friendship are forged through childhood escapades, life transitions, selfless acts of kindness, and simply walking together through bonding experiences,” (White and White). Building intimate friendships require shared real-life adventures

and experiences. Through these challenges in life, people help each other out, building empathy and mutual trust, the foundation of a strong friendship. The internet, however, blocks the natural up-and-downs in real life. Moreover, with the barrier of two screens and an indeterminable distance in between, it is hard to reach out to a friend and comfort him/her if they encounter hardships in life, making it more difficult to help each other out and build trust and empathy, leading to a shallower friendship.

In conclusion, the internet's anonymity causes lack of honesty and mutual respect, while its blocking of the natural flow of the challenges real life provides makes it harder to build trust and empathy. Deep authentic relationships are one thing that virtual social interactions just can't substitute.

Psychological Problems: FOMO

Even more pronounced is the severe psychological concerns created by constant use of social media. At the heart of this is FOMO, the "feeling of missing out". Originally identified in 1996 by Dr. Dan Herman, FOMO is rooted on the fear of missing out on an important experience or social interaction, causing a desire to constantly stay connected with what others are doing. This promotes actions like watching short videos, constantly checking social media, checking the news for updates, etc. FOMO is typically linked with low self-esteem, anxiety, feelings of social exclusion and depression, all of which are harmful to our psychological health ("Fear of Missing Out").

Social media, which provides a constant stream of the wonderful life experiences that other people are having, is a primary cause of FOMO. Constant use of social media causes higher levels of FOMO, in turn causing more dependency on social media, creating a loop that harms our psychological health. Constant comparison of our own lives to the "perfect" lives of others causes stress and disappointment in life, also pressuring social media users to post similarly popular content. According to a study conducted in 2014, 40% of social media using teenagers report feeling pressure to "post positive and attractive content about themselves" (Lenhart). Another study shows that those who used social media over three hours each day faced twice the risk of facing mental health problems as ones who don't (Katella). Adding on to these negative impacts on psychological health, social media algorithms, designed to

promote information according to the user's interests, also provides harmful information containing extreme and inappropriate content, directly leading to cases of depression and many real-life suicidal attempts.

Impact on Emotional Growth

Besides its impacts on mental health, studies have found that social media have a lasting negative effect on the abilities of young people to grow both emotionally and physically. According to US surgeon general Vivek Murthy, spending too much time and viewing FOMO-causing information in virtual social interactions “disrupts activities essential for health, such as sleep and physical activity.” Its effects are most severe for young people between the ages of 10 and 19, whose brain “is going through a highly sensitive period” forming abilities on self-worth, communication with people, emotional learning and regulation, and impulse control, all skills needed to communicate and collaborate effectively in the real human society (Katella).

Data Control

While you are connected more to your friends' personal lives on social media, so does every organization or individual who has access (whether legal or illegal) to your friend's personal information. These traces that people leave when they go online are called digital footprints. As dependency in social media grows, so does the risk of privacy issues and data leakages. In a study conducted in 2014, 88% of teenagers agree that people overshare on social media, i.e. exposing too much information about themselves. At the same time, 42% of teenagers (most likely older or white teens) have had someone post their private information that they cannot change or control (Lenhart).

Apart from individuals, businesses can also sell the data to third party data brokers, and hackers can leak data contained on social media platforms concerning your email address, passwords and even embarrassing details about your private life. Only earlier in April 2025, 200 million social media records have been leaked from the major social media platform X through a bug bounty program. Though the bug is patched, some of the data resurfaced again in later leaks (Knutsson). This information, once in the hands of criminals, are often used for illegal money transactions, identity theft, access to bank accounts and blackmail, causing major security problems in a virtual-social-interaction-dependent society.

Cyberbullying

Another great problem with virtual social interactions is cyberbullying. What makes it so dangerous is not only the anonymity of the bully, but also the constant repetition of the bullying and the quick spread of radical statements and lies about the victim through the fast internet, which can harm the victim's mental health severely in the long term. According to a 2022 study of teens aged 13 to 17, 46% report having at least experienced one type of cyberbullying, from the most common name calling to false rumors, physical threats, receiving images they didn't ask for, having explicit images of them shared without permission, constantly being asked about their private information (Atske).

The continued harassment leads to depression, anxiety and even suicide among victims. Cases of real suicides caused by cyberbullying (often including rumors of sexual orientation or sharing of sexual photos) include those of Ryan Halligan, Hope Witsell, Tyler Clementi and Amanda Todd. According to the NIH, data shows that up to 13.6 percent of adolescents have made a serious suicide attempt (Schonfeld). The detrimental psychological effects of cyberbullying on victims have a great magnitude, further proving the harm of social media.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while virtual social interactions provide both speed and ease to kickstarting a relationship, its detrimental impacts significantly outweigh its positive ones. Solid evidence shows how social media leads to shallower friendships, FOMO and psychological problems, obstacles on the emotional growth of young people, privacy concerns and cyberbullying.

All of these not only significantly impacts the emotional lives of social media users, but moreover, creates a more instable future society. The relationships between people may be shallower, psychological problems will be prominent, the emotional capabilities of humans will not be fully developed, and data security problems and cyberbullying will become the new leading sources of crime. These issues lead to less collaboration and harmony between humans, causing potential unresolved conflicts between nations in the future world, raising the possibility of war and international

conflicts.

Therefore, I argue that the replacement of virtual social interactions has a negative long-term effect on the human society.

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