

In the digital age, is virtual social interaction gradually replacing face-to-face social interaction? If so, is this trend more beneficial or more detrimental to the long-term development of human society?

One of the first of virtual conversations - "*Mr. Watson, come here, I need you*" was given by Alexander Graham Bell through his invention named telephone. Since then, numerous ways have been developed for people to have virtual communication, including emails, messages, phone calls etc. In the modern world, it is widely agreed that virtual social interaction, which is widely believed as the act of interacting with and manipulating objects or elements within a virtual world or environment, has become an important part of people's life, and debates about whether it will replace face-to-face social interaction have been popular as well. In my opinion, since virtual social interaction has multiple advantages compared to face-to-face social interaction, it is reasonable to state that virtual social interaction will gradually replace face-to-face social interaction.

In the modern world, it is obvious that people start having virtual interactions more often. For example, people are more likely to have a talk on their phones when they are discussing something. Numerous virtual applications also provide people with platforms to communicate, such as Wechat and Facebook. Driven by the motive of profit, social media platforms tend to offer services that surpass face-to-face interactions in aspects like convenience and privacy, aiming to attract more people. As a result, it's not astonishing to see that more than 5.24 billion people currently use social media worldwide, which is more than double compared to 2.07 billion in 2015 (*Backlinko Team*). There is no doubt that virtual social interaction methods are being developed unstopably, and it is likely to replace face-to-face social interaction gradually in centuries.

After identifying such trend, we now have the question of whether such trend will be beneficial to the human society in long term or not. However, before we analyze the benefits and harms of virtual social interaction, it is important to know the role of overall social interaction in the human society. If virtual interaction can achieve more benefits brought by face-to-face or other forms of social interaction in human society, we will be able to justify its positive impacts. As is known to many, humans are gregarious creatures, and this desire to share presence with others and to connect with others is a manifestation of our gregarious nature (*Costa*). Through this desire to communicate, interactions among people are created, and this forms the foundation of a human society. In other words, human society can be described as a complex process, where people live and grow by interaction with the others, and thus the whole being gets unified. In this case of scenario, at the macro level, the role of social interaction is to unite individual people and form close relationships in order to stabilize the society.

Then, from the micro level, what are the benefits of social interaction? A lot of researches have proved the improvements brought by social interaction regarding people's mental health. Take social media as an example, a systematic search (2004-2022) about its impact on mental well-being (eg. depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness) turns out that 39% of the included samples have significant mental improvements, and 30% of the included samples have mixed effects (*Plackett, Blyth, et al. ...*). Furthermore, the mental health improvements can also include sense of belonging, emotional support, less stress and anxiety etc. Such benefits are crucial to human being, for it can help us cope with harsh circumstances and endure depression.

Now that we have analyzed the benefits brought by overall social interactions, it is crucial to discuss whether such things can be achieved or not in the future, where virtual interactions replace face-to-face interaction. In a world, where almost everyone is able to have access to the internet (or other kinds of platform for virtual interaction), it will be way much easier for every day communication. This is because virtual tools can eliminate the things that hinder us from communicating with others in real life, such as long distance, lack of time etc. Centuries before, when people are not able to have access to virtual interactions, it is nearly impossible for a person to communicate with people on another continent. However, the invention of telephone provides people with the ability to hear another person's voice hundreds of miles away. Such revolutionary developments can allow human beings from different countries, different continents, different cultures communicate with each other, and eliminate the cultural misunderstandings that have existed for centuries due to the inconvenience of face-to-face communication. From this perspective, virtual interactions seem to be able to contribute more to uniting people and form stable societies compared to traditional ways for communicating.

In addition to this, virtual interactions tend to be more attractive to people. This is because in a trend where everyone starts communicating online, it is obvious that competitions between different internet platforms will increase. Applications will be incentivized to design better products in order to attract more users. By making virtual interaction more appealing, more people will be engaged in to the virtual human society. This means that in the long term, more people will be engaged in societies since corporations are able to make more profit by attracting more users using social media. What are the impacts of high engagement? Through high contact in virtual societies, people are able to know about the place they live in better. Before, without virtual interaction, people's eyesight might be restrained in a single village or city. There also might be people who are inactive in a society. With more people attracted to using social media and other kinds of virtual interaction, citizens in a country can access to a wider range of information. For example, it will be more convenient for citizens to communicate

with the government. Such higher citizen engagement may contribute to better policies made by the government. As mentioned earlier, such circumstances can also develop communications between people from different countries and different cultures.

On the other side, there are concerns about virtual interaction's negative impact on people, especially young people. In this status quo, with social media and other forms of virtual interaction becoming more and more developed, the young generation have been especially attracted to the virtual world. They tend to chat with their friends online, and they also make a lot of new friends through internet as well. For example, in a survey about middle school students using social media, among 593 middle schools, 17% started using social media at age nine or younger, 40% accepted friend requests from people they do not know, and 40% reported that their parents did not monitor their social media use, which calls for the needs of cyber-security education (*Martin, Wang*). This indicates the possible danger on children who are not educated well and at young age. Not only might they be cyberbullied on social medias, but they might also create harassment on the internet themselves.

Though these concerns are reasonable, from the long-term point of view, these problems are likely to be solved. At present, the reason why young students might be threatened is that people lack cyber-security education in general. However, there are clues to prove that awareness will be developed along the replacement of face-to-face interaction. For example, in Singapore, the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) addresses cyberbullying by penalizing acts like harassment, stalking, and online threats. With the spread of virtual interaction, we are likely to see how virtual platforms form better rules against harassment and cyberbullying. In other words, most problems in the status quo are likely to be solved in the future.

In conclusion, though there might be negative impacts on the society in short term due to the trend of virtual interaction, from a future-oriented point of view, these potential problems have a high likelihood of being resolved. Furthermore, it is likely that virtual social interaction gradually replacing face-to-face social interaction will be beneficial to the society in long term for it not only fulfills the need of social interaction within a society, but also provides people with better communication experience, such as making social interactions more convenient and entertaining. Such methods are able to make more people engaged in the human society, which can establish human collaboration even better.

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