From Connection to Division: The Impact of Social Media on Relationships

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Social media has fully integrated into our modern lives and due to social media’s wide use and its potential negative effects on relationships, an exploration into the research that has been done is warranted. In “Why Social Media is Ruining Your Relationships” by Katherine Ormerod, published on May 29th, 2019, Ormerod’s argues that social media creates more superficial relationships and increased feelings of loneliness and isolation. Ormerod’s article speaks well on the negative affects social media has on relationships, but a deeper examination of research reveals stronger evidence of social media promoting superficial connections, negatively impacting relationships due to reduced mental well-being, and that social media increases the creation of parasocial relationships. Overall, Ormerod’s negative view appears to be true.

Ormerod argues that social media creates more superficial relationships and increased feelings of loneliness and isolation. Ormerod highlights the differences between actively engaging with others online and observing without interacting. She contends that social media can be used in a way that is not harmful, but ultimately Ormerod believes that most use social media in a way that is detrimental. She uses Dunbar’s Number to support her claims by connecting the suggested limit of 150 meaningful relationships to the hundreds or thousands of people you can easily interact with online. Ormerod claims that “most of these people are not your friends” (Ormerod, 2019), to build off Dunbar’s Number theory and explain how relationship interactions on social media cannot replace offline, genuine connections. Overall, Ormerod’s article warns readers that social media platforms make us feel like we are connected with one another while offering a replacement for authentic interactions and highlights the importance of meaningful in-person interactions for the creation and maintenance of intimate relationships.

Ormerod’s article does well to speak on the negative affects social media has on relationships. However, to fully encapsulate the impacts, it is imperative to investigate the contributing factors found in research, such as the promotion of superficial connections, the relationships complications due to poor mental well-being, and the increase of parasocial relationships. It is clear that social media’s effects on relationships are more negative than positive.

Social media promotes superficial connections and slows the development of deeper relationships. Ormerod argues that social media promotes a distorted view of relationships. She states, “our phones and social apps haven’t just changed how we make relationships, they’ve also changed what we believe relationships to be.” (Ormerod, 2019) Young adults, adolescents, and children may not feel the difference as they grew up with social media as a part of their daily lives. The older generations are able to better understand the differences between social media cultivated relationships and more historically natural ones.

The article "Social Media and Relationships" notes that "Questions have […] been raised about the quality of online relationships when they substitute for offline relationships." (Butler, Matook, 2015) The authors continue with how social media “may seem like the more efficient way to find and form friendships, but those relationships can be insufficient if physical touch or intensive persuasion are necessary.” (Butler, Matook, 2015)

Butler and Matook have found that their research points to the change of relationships which in turn negatively affects relationships that require physicality. As many serious partnerships involve a physical component it is clear that relationships formed with social media have the tendency to suffer. Furthermore, due to the age of this article, which is before social media such as TikTok, it shows that social media’s effects were negative and have been on a trajectory for the worse.

Social media negatively impacts mental well-being which in turn harms relationships. Ormerod speaks on the negative emotional impacts of passive media consumption. Many feel inadequacy and the fear of missing out just as Ormerod states, “Instead of the feel-good hormones we might expect to be pumping through our veins, instead we’re torn between feelings of FOMO and inadequacy. (Ormerod, 2019) People who frequent the usage of social media feel like they are missing out when peers may be going to certain events or accomplishing something that they are unable to. These feelings can evolve into self-esteem issues and flow into relationship interactions. It is quite common amongst the younger generations to express the fear of missing out on social media and in person. This type of feeling stems from the natural want to be included in communities and group settings. The feelings can grow to become destructive to oneself in the form of lowered self-esteem and possibly resentment towards a partner that cannot provide the experience financially or in any other socioeconomic way.

In “The new social landscape: Relationships among social media use, social skills, and offline friendships from age 10–18 years”, authors Steinsbekk et al. provide support to Ormerod’s claims. Their findings report that, “the interaction term between social media use and the intercept (i.e., overall level) of social anxiety was negative and significant.” (Steinsbekk et al., 2024) These feelings of social anxiety often mean insecurities come forward. Insecurities unmanaged bring conflict between partners, friends, and families when conversations revolving around those arise.

The alteration of relationships and the increase of parasocial relationships offers a different perspective on social media. Ormerod introduces a point of how social media has modified our relationships by stating, "Our phones and social apps haven’t just changed how we make relationships, they’ve also changed what we believe relationships to be." (Ormerod, 2019) Ormerod is getting to the point of how people use social media to find likeminded people for friendships and partnerships. This quick and easiness of connecting with people reduces the possibility of having a personal relationship with them. Parasocial relationships inevitably come about. In the article, “Parasocial relationships, social media, & wellbeing”, the authors exclaim that “[Parasocial relationships] develop in part through observing media figures and imagining interactions with them.” (Hoffner, Bond, 2022) As more and more people connect, parasocial relationships tend to be created due to the sheer number of people that attempt to connect with one another. The popularity of a group or individual increases to a level that effectively removes the ability for each interaction to be replied to. At first glance, this could be seen as negative. However, Hoffner and Bond report that “social media platforms provide opportunities for people to develop and sustain psychological connections with a wide range of people with whom they do not have (fully) reciprocal relationships.” (Hoffner, Bond, 2022)

They go further into examples such as how “[Parasocial relationships] with media figures who share a marginalized identity can facilitate development of identity, self-esteem, and well-being.” (Hoffner, Bond, 2022) It is clear that social media’s breeding of parasocial relationships has created benefits for certain groups of people, but the overall negative impact social media has on relationships largely outweighs this focused positive.

The research connects social media and relationships to be an overall negative correlation in the quality of relationships by promoting superficiality and its tendency to reduce relationship quality by negatively impacting mental well-being. However, social media’s alteration of relationships promotes a positive side through the creation of parasocial relationships, allowing certain demographic profiles to have an improved quality of life.

While the research points to an overall negative influence in relationships, social media is not going away, so how can we modify social media into a healthier environment for people to cultivate meaningful relationships? And as society increasingly progresses towards an almost symbiotic relationship, how will we collectively promote healthier relationship environments?

Social media’s usage exploded, the nature of relationships has been changed, and the negative impacts it can have on one’s relationships should be taken into account, but if one finds a benefit due to their individuality, they should use social media in a way that serves them the best.

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