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Disappearing in the Internet Age: Social Media’s Influence on our Lives

I remember when my mother gave me *the* *talk,* not about the birds and the bees (that was a separate occasion), but about the dangers of the internet and my use of social media. Why a young child would long for a page on social media is beyond my recollection, but I suppose we do these things at first not for their actual value, but for their popularity. My mother set restrictions on my social media usage, which began as a complete restriction from Myspace, then the most popular social media host. However, she permitted the use of a less popular site, Xanga, under the premise that I did not use my real name. I was warned that the internet, while useful, could also be a scary place full of people with less than noble intentions. As time passed, the restrictions imposed on my social media presence grew increasingly lax. I eventually moved onto Myspace, utilized my real name on my profile, and migrated to Facebook just as it was becoming big. Now with its 8 data centers holding the names, dates of birth, and locations of its over 1 billion users, Facebook, along with other forms of social media, has changed not only the way we humans interact but also most of our suspicions of the internet (Facebook). Have these concerns that my mother once warned of completely void today? Social media has changed the lives of all its users, but it’s not all peaches and creme. Some even suggest that abstaining from social media may lead to a happier, healthier life.

Look around. Many of those faces you see are probably represented in a profile picture on some social media website online. I was admittedly young when I first started using social media, but I was more of an outlier, not the norm. Nowadays, a good portion of age groups as young as pre-teens have personal accounts on Facebook. Although Facebook has implemented safety features striving to dissuade users under 13, these young, tech-savvy students find ways to circumnavigate the barriers, allowing them to post personal and potentially sensitive information online (Ferenstein). While we all have the ability to leak personal data online, younger users do not always understand and certainly cannot consent to sharing of potentially private content. The United Kingdom department of education sees this influx of pre-teens on social media as such a large problem that they have urged schools to implement courses based upon internet safety (Ferenstein).

An interruption of privacy isn’t the only problem facing young users of social media. “Facebook depression”, as it is being called, has been studied among teen users of sites such as the titular Facebook as well as Instagram and Snapchat. The blatant friend count that all these platforms broadcast make social media a sort of online popularity contest (Associated Press). Many of us, including older generations, can relate to the feeling of not being one of the popular kids in high school, but while that contest was among just a few hundred kids, this new era of popularity is scaled to a nearly worldwide audience. While the more hardened side of our emotions may just want to tell these kids to “suck it up”, the Academy of Pediatrics suggest that the desire for online popularity and the failure that usually follows can have a large impact on a teens psychological and social health (Associated Press).

While young users may not fully understand the error of their ways when posting sensitive content online and may not even enjoy the experience, it begs the question as to why they continue to use social media in the first place. The idea behind social media, being able to connect with anyone, anywhere at any time, is one that seems intrinsically valuable because of humans’ constant desire to socialize. Also, the possibility to be under the spotlight and become Facebook famous seems very real at first. Even to the most introverted people, being behind a computer screen allows for a sense of protection. If things go wrong, you can just stop any form of communication, in theory anyway. In many ways, however, this is not the case. Once accustomed to the constant connection that is social media, it may be hard to step away, since it is most likely a primary form of communication among friends, especially if separated by distance.

The ability to communicate with friends over long distances is what draws older users to social media, not the popularity. Facebook may have been started to connect university students, but in recent years that age group has moved on to other platforms. However, it is becoming increasingly popular with the older crowd. Therefore, one would assume that the content has shifted to a more intelligent discussion. However, we’ve all heard the stories of someone getting denied a job or getting caught for something via social media. Yet, seemingly everyone has that one friend (or more) who feels the need to post about their controversial and perhaps slightly racist opinion on Facebook. Have they not heard of these stories? Most of us have, so I don’t believe this to be the case. So, do they not care?

According to Nancy Colier, a licensed clinical social worker, there was once a stage of development in life where it was normal to stops focusing on how others see yourself. Colier argues that this stage is now gone, and people turn to social media to continue getting gratification from others, but I see the opposite argument as well. Social media allows us to voice our opinions to many more people than a normal conversation would allow. Due to the aforementioned protection of a computer screen, users past this stage of external judgment feel empowered to write what they truly feel without worrying about its repercussions. People browsing their Facebook wall will read a post they disagree with and continue scrolling, never to think about it again. This allows for a Facebook poster to voice his or her opinion without the potential social repercussions that a one on one conversation may bring, which may be seen as a large benefit to the system. However, where the system falls short is when someone has the time to look through a person’s posting history, such as a potential employer. When all the information you have on a person is their rants on their Facebook wall, it may be hard to see that person in any other light, as first impressions are often the most important.

While Facebook and other social media websites have their benefits, such as connecting users across long distances and satisfying our natural desire for social interaction, there are many reasons why you won’t see me or many other young professionals post much on publicly viewable sites. Some may see the benefits of their posts outweigh the possibility of ruining potential professional connections, but at this point in my life, I don’t concur. I haven’t personally felt the effects of “Facebook depression”, but I certainly understand the desire to be popular. However, I realize not only the unlikeliness of this, but also the lack of meaning that it has in the real world. Could I ever leave social media completely? Perhaps over time, as it does play an important part in my life. It is the preferred form of communication among much of my friend group and can be a fun way to share content. So, I don’t think I will give it up, but if I ever get labeled as an overly opinionated Facebook poster, I hope I have the wherewithal to cut it out completely.

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