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Social Media and Rhetoric

Recently, Amazon, the electronic commerce company, has come out with endearing advertisements that play to people's emotions. One scenario presents a man and his dog in a park, and the man is playing guitar to earn some money. His earnings are meager, and as an onlooker observes from across the street, the dog is shown as sad and desperate by the feet of his owner. The screen then goes back to the onlooker who pulls out her phone. With one click on the Amazon website, the scene goes back to the man and his dog. This time, the dog is in a pirate costume, and his owner's hat is filled with coins as the pedestrians admire this charming duo. The message conveys that with just one simple click of a button, all of life's problems can go away. Evidently, social media has very successfully infiltrated our lives. It is a constant in our world today, and whether or not people see it as a positive or negative influence, we have reached a point where we will never again know a world without social media as a reigning presence. The fact of the matter is that while social media brings those further away from us closer, it also leads those who are closer to us further away. This statement is both figurative and literal in that those further away in physical distance will foster connections through social media, and those closer in distance might be emotionally disconnected due to social media. While there are some positive effects to this dynamic, I will argue that the negative ones are more prevalent. The effect of social media on relationships is negative because our need to connect physically is not fulfilled through virtual interaction, our isolation from those closest to us presents a possible danger for situations of distress, and our dependence on technology prevents us from being able to rely on ourselves for effective communication.

The use of social media in relationships might seem fulfilling but more often than not, it will prevent an individual from getting what they need out of a relationship, and that includes physical connection. Because we are now better able to connect to those further away from us, through mediums such as Skype, Email, and Facebook, we invest more time and energy into those relationships. Unfortunately, this leaves less room for the intimate relationships in one's immediate surrounding, and those relationships can suffer. In a study done by professor Bradley J. Bond, the relationships between people and their favorite celebrities were analysed based on the evidence of their influential nature. The study claims that followers have strong parasocial relationships with a celebrity who is more active on social media, and that this unilateral parasocial connection is even stronger when the followers have direct contact with that celebrity (659). These fan connections are very influential for teenagers and yet, there is never any, if not very minimal, reciprocity. The individuals will invest everything into these relationships, and they get very little in return. On a more common note, the same concept can be applied to long-distance relationships. A web article written by Alvic Plan accurately describes how social media can be seemingly beneficial for a relationship, but in truth does more harm than good. The author does this by presenting the term of "disincentiveness." This term is used to describe how our motivation for reaching out to someone in a long-distance relationship, whether it be romantic or otherwise, can wear out because of the impression of connectedness that the activity on social

media makes. As an example, Plan used the analogy of receiving numerous wishes and notes on your birthday from Facebook friends. In truth, a phone call or personal text would be more meaningful, but the act of writing the short message on someone's wall gives us the impression that we have effectively connected with one another. What's more, the use of social media offers both direct and indirect communication forms. Direct forms include personal messages in an email, tags on Twitter, or posting on one another's walls on Facebook. Indirect communication forms require no reaching out; just by looking at someone's feed or timeline, you can get a glimpse of their day-to-day life. While constantly staying connected is beneficial in a long-distance relationship, that same connectedness can provide a "disincentive to actively reach out to each other which can take a toll on our relationships". So, when taking into account two people separated geographically and trying to maintain a relationship, those small gestures can be quite crucial. However, with social media being constantly available to give us a glimpse of each other's lives, we no longer feel the urge to make the effort for those gestures. Coincidentally, social media has generic shortcuts put in place that can easily replace those gestures, and before too long, they become the new method of communication. Ironically, those gestures were a means of replacing the connection where physical proximity lacked, and now that alternative is gone. Many long-distance relationships work. However, those that fail are lost to miscommunication and an inability to connect physically, which is a basic need for us social beings.

Moreover, another faltering aspect of social media's dominating effect in relationships can be witnessed through mental and psychological health issues. Nowadays, mental health is more widely discussed and becoming less stigmatized. While this is having a positive effect on people's ability to disclose their personal struggles, there is still much resistance and shame that comes with being open about those issues. With social media being a new medium in which people choose to disclose information, the comfort in having anonymity can be dangerous. To clarify, more people are comfortable disclosing to social media than to other people around them. In situations of imminent danger, such as potential for self-harm or suicide, reaching out to social media will not likely have the same immediate effect as reaching out to those in one's proximity. In that sense, relying on social media might not get an individual the help they require in time. Even if we consider situations that are less time-sensitive, the aftermath remains the same. If people are more comfortable turning to social media for help, it will isolate them and prevent them from having the necessary external supports. A study done by Samuel H. Van Rensburg et al. looked at the patient-provider relationships in a youth psychiatric facility and the component of social media as a tool for additional support. The authors based their study on the previously established fact that youth tend to rely on the Internet for access to medical information because they are less comfortable with face-to-face interactions with a health care professional. While the study found that the use of social media allows for more on-going monitoring through posts and status updates, the risks involved include the presence of anxiety in the youth if there was no immediate response from the provider, and generally a less rich interaction (118). While some positive factors were highlighted, the main idea remains as such; although people feel more comfortable seeking support online, they may not be rewarded with the proper supports. If individuals were better able to find connections with others, they would establish a more secure network of supports that assures they can be monitored should they face mental health challenges.

The last point worth mentioning is applicable in all relationships, whether close or far in physical distance, or whether romantic or familial. As much as technology does for our advancements in communication, the omnipresence of its impact directly reflects itself in how relationships function. In other words, the way we depend on social media in order to communicate our thoughts and feelings becomes more than a habit, and soon enough we find we are unable to rely on just ourselves to properly convey our emotions and opinions to others. Picture this scenario: a teenage girl is messaging a boy from her school, and does not quite feel the same way about him than he does about her. He sends her a message, asking her about her plans for the weekend. She is not sure how to reply, but she knows that she has time to think about what to say because her privacy settings are set so that the boy cannot see that she has read the message. She can quickly go on the search engine and type 'excuse to not make plans during the weekend.' When she finds a satisfying answer, she will go back to the message (which now shows that she has read it) and give a smart, polite answer. Now, picture this scenario face to face. Without the help of technology at her fingertips, this has now become an awkward encounter where the girl struggles to reply and the boy is possibly hurt. These things are supposed to happen, but we learn from them, and we learn to be honest about our feelings. Thanks to technology, we always have the option to lie. With the younger generations being able to completely rely on technology in order to avoid awkward interactions, they will no longer feel confident in their abilities to present themselves to others in person and know that they can accurately convey their ideas. There have been studies done, such as the one by Jennifer Gerson et al., that prove that there is a positive correlation between personality traits and their impact on the association between subjective well-being and social comparison on Facebook, which provides valuable insight into the altering effects of social media (820). This study shows that factors such as personality traits and type of social media used can affect an individual's response to life satisfaction. This in turn can influence relationships, and more specifically, the links between the presence of social media in someone's life and the quality of their relationships. Another study done by Joy Goodman-Dean et al. claims that there is in fact a significant correlation between the type of technology used and the effect of social media, but there is no real link in terms of the nature of the relationship (224). This again reinforces the idea that the richness of the relationship is very dependent on social media and technology, which implies that the nature of a relationship would differ quite drastically without them. This is a truth that is widely accepted by many researchers, but the influence social media has is adversative in nature. We rely on technology to convey what we are too afraid to say, and while it often works, every system has a flaw. At times when technology does fail us, we may not have the ability to fend for ourselves.

To conclude, it is no secret that social media has become a constant in our lives. What is more, the learning that has come along with its arrival has made improvements in our society. Nevertheless, along with all its benefits, social media is accompanied with multiple hindrances. It is clear that humanity will never return to life without technology. So, if we focus on its negative effects and try to eradicate them, we would never be successful because we would, in essence, be trying to eliminate technology all together. Instead, it is important to be asking the right questions concerning social media in order to understand how to use it more efficiently. For instance, examining negative factors such as the physical barrier that social media creates with relationships might help lead to questions that will work towards bettering the issue. Social media can also isolate people from their close circles when they feel more comfortable confiding in their technology, and this is dangerous when considering the immediate support needed in

certain life-threatening, mental health-related situations. Most importantly, the extent to which we rely on technology and social media to navigate our relationships is risky considering the fact that we lose our own abilities to communicate effectively without the help of technology as a mediator. These factors prove why social media's effects on relationships are more negative than not, when considering the following statement: Social media brings those who are further away from us closer, and those who are closer to us further away. While the first half of the sentence refers to physical rather than emotional distance, the last half is structured the opposite way. The purpose of this statement is to remind people that no matter how social media is used as a component of their relationships, it is crucial to first acknowledge its role and then to develop an awareness of how its effects influence those relationships.

Works Cited

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