

Omar Hasan

Ms. Terry Evans

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Effects of OSNs on Digital Citizens

“We watch a film on YouTube while checking an email that has just popped up, and Internet shopping. We answer a call on Skype and check our RSS feed while talking. We Google a question, and end up on a site via a string of links about an unrelated topic. We head to Twitter, and scan some tweets, while IMing and emailing at the same time” (Booth 16). This is known as the ‘busy life’ of today. In trains, buses, offices, schools, shopping centers, one common thing to notice in every place is people staring at their phones or computers. Most of the people are busy on “Online Social Networking Sites”, also abbreviated as OSNs. OSNs such as Instagram and Facebook are very popular among many others that claim that they help to ‘connect people’. ‘Do you have a Facebook account?’ is one of the most common questions asked by people during their first meeting to retain communication with other people, probably to replace face-to-face communication. At the first meeting between two people, this is the first question asked so that they can remain in touch beyond that single meeting. The essence of in person communication is not even considered as long as people have other ‘online alternatives’. Moreover, OSNs have become free platforms to advertise and expose users’ talents and personal lives. Many may debate why blame digitalization for poor communication or distraction when it lets you do almost everything that you could not do a decade ago and lets you connect to your loved ones. But as every beautiful rose comes with a thorn, OSNs come with dangerous consequences.

Though online social networking sites like Instagram and Facebook help to connect the world with the touch of a button, they have reduced the personal communication that once existed, have turned communication into competition for popularity, are a big source of distraction for students and workers, and have reduced the confidentiality of personal information.

OSNs have drastically reduced the personal communication that once existed, as they have physically isolated people. These days it is very rare to see two people sitting adjacent to each other talking or even acknowledging each other's presence. It is so common to see people absorbed in their phones communicating with people they may not even know in person. "We sit on a train and notice everyone is staring down at a handheld screen. We sit in our homes and notice no one is talking to each other – they're all texting, instant messaging other people. We sit in our offices and notice everyone is battling against a never-ending information stream" (Booth 13). They have brought people thousands of miles apart closer, but have separated people sitting adjacent to them. As a consequence, people do not even recognize their neighbors. In the book titled "Disconnected, Youth, New Media and the Ethics Gap" Carrie and Jenkins say "We often use technology to save time, but increasingly, it takes much of our saved time along with it, or makes the saved time less present, intimate and rich. The closer the world gets to our fingerprints, the farther it gets away from our hearts" (3). The evolution of OSNs into people's lives have also created loneliness as people are always busy on their phones discouraging group activities that could be more amusing, creative and healthy.

In addition to separation of geographically close people, these applications are so powerful that they have managed to change the medium of communication. As a result, youngsters have developed poor communication skills. "A study in China, of a group of

19-year-olds who spent an average of 10 hours a day in front of a screen, showed that excessive use of the Internet is associated with shrinkage of certain parts of the brain. The changes were in the parts of the brain that control attention and emotional processing” (Booth 15). Though they have made communication easier for those who cannot meet their loved ones, as was their original purpose, they have replaced in person communication with online interaction. They hesitate to talk to people who are right in front of them and talk to someone who might be far and may not be related to them anyway nor may ever meet them. They find their “online buddies” closer to them and seem to show no gratitude to the people who have taken the effort to come and see them in person. Due to excessive use of online applications, youngsters find it difficult to talk to people out loud as they have become used to typing their responses in abbreviated forms. They have developed poor face-to-face interaction, as they just do not get to ‘practice speaking’ to people enough. Therefore, despite connecting geographically isolated people, OSNs have harshly brought down the essence of communication separating physically closer people and hampering face-to-face interaction. People separate their real time friends and family from online friends.

OSNs make people more prone to losing information to the huge population of users on the internet without identifying the dangerous risks involved like stalking and cyber-bullying. Nowadays, people post every aspect of their personal lives on OSNs as they are encouraged to do so by their online social circles. OSNs have become huge libraries and each user account has turned into a book that contains information about almost every activity of the users, their favorite people, their jobs, their relationships, sensitive information like date of birth, physical addresses etc. This has made people’s information “more porous” to the mass out there. “Public

is the new private: young people often realize that their blogs and homepages are public and accessible, but they trust that only their peers are interested enough to view them. Adults are supposed to know where they are not welcome and act accordingly” (James et al. 38). Natural as it may seem, most people using online sites are not mature enough to understand the real life consequences of the steps they take to become popular and what they make available to the public. Furthermore, there is no way to verify if the people with whom users form relationships and create emotional attachment, share every aspect of their lives and get closer to than others are even real. “Services such as text messaging, instant messaging, and e-mail provided stalkers with additional avenues of contact, often with the benefit of anonymity, while data brokers sold personal information for a nominal fee” (Stalking 2). Since people have replaced traditional in person communication and telephonic conversations with text messaging, many of these incidents have started to increase as people lose information to strangers or even known people with harmful intentions. “In the United States, one-fourth of stalking victims reported that they had been the target of cyberstalking” (Stalking 2). Many people have been and are becoming victims of stalking and leaking out their personal information to strangers just because they misunderstood those people due to no physical interaction or because the people faked someone else’s identity.

Besides stalking, many criminals even use people’s pictures, alter them using photo editing techniques and post them on social networking sites to tarnish innocent peoples’ images. Users post countless number of images every day to their profiles which can be downloaded anytime by anyone they make the pictures accessible to. They do not have any idea if anyone would ever use their pictures to create fake accounts, alter pictures and use them to harm the

owner of the pictures. “The anonymity afforded online can bring out dark impulses that might otherwise be suppressed” (Jung 1). Also known as Cyber-bullying, the effects of such activities have publically insulted many people, especially females and have led to serious consequences ranging from isolating themselves from the societies to committing suicide. Along with the increase of OSN usage, “Cyber-bullying has spread widely among youth, with 42% reporting that they have been victims, according to a 2010 CBS News report” (Jung 1). Cyber-bullying has mostly affected people of younger ages since they post their day to day activities totally unaware of the dark consequences which lead to depression, harassment, and embarrassment. Thus, the feature of sharing all data and media of users with a huge mass of public is bringing way more destruction than help and OSNs are mainly responsible for cyber-bullying only because of their extended sharing features.

OSNs are a big source of distraction for students and workers and have drastic effects on the users’ brains, activities and relationships. People do not seem to ever wonder why the cognitive thinking of youngsters and adults are decreasing. Before the evolution of OSNs, people were more attached to books, and comparatively engaged in more productive talking, that yielded better results and improved the cognitive thinking. These days, students study only when they have “free time” from their social interaction with the virtual circles they have formed. “A report by the Kaiser Family Foundation showed that 8- to 18-year-olds in America use media for 7 hours and 38 minutes a day, which goes up to 10 hours and 45 minutes a day including overlap using multiple devices at once” (Booth 17). As seen in the above research statistics, if so much time of the day is devoted to OSNs apart from their daily school and work activities, there is hardly any time to study or learn anything productive. Parents are not worried about this issue

either, as they have become more indulged in technology and try to compete against the modern generation to become more exposed to OSNs. Unfortunately, they fail to rescue their children and end up being victims of this giant trap. As a result, kids become so dissolved in the river of technology that they get bad at choosing where to place their attention because their brains are so overloaded and multitasking makes their judgment poor. “Ever since I got a smartphone I have been distracted from everything. I watch television less, do homework less, and even spend less time with my friends and family” (Mitchell 3). In the statement, the student bravely confesses her weakness towards social media apps and mentions its negative impact on her life. It can be accepted that people will want to check on the people or things of their interest once in a while, and that will even refresh their minds, but staring at a digital glared device all day making it the top priority over everything else, not only brings distracts people from their activities, but also affects their thinking abilities and judgment.

Though the main purpose of OSNs was to bring people closer through communication, they have become a platform for competition for popularity, which hurts people’s self-esteem when the desired popularity is not achieved. It is not very uncommon to hear that “she has more likes on Facebook or more followers on Instagram or Twitter” and this begins the competition for popularity that goes far away from the original motive of the OSNs to bring people close. The competition hardly ever ends and people use every personal thing they have, to gain public attention, forgetting their self-esteem, taking up competition for popularity as a challenge, as a lifetime goal. The question is how much pain and trouble they are ready to take to expose their personal lives and their filtered pictures just to achieve popularity on a networking site when they know that in a few days their efforts and time to transform the picture into a bridge for

public attention will be buried under thousands of other pictures of the like. The user's level of confidence also depends on the mere figures that represent the number of views or likes. There are teens who concentrate more on their appearances and invest a lot of money and time on their looks to try and look as good as a filtered picture on someone's profile they may not even know. In fact "the rise of 'selfies' is having a huge impact on the facial plastic surgery industry according to a new study by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery" (Facial Plastic Surgery 1). The fact that raises such concerns is that "one in three facial plastic surgeons surveyed saw an increase in requests for procedures due to patients being more self-aware of looks in social media" (Facial Plastic Surgery 1). Teens are the biggest victims of this trend as they get frustrated and fear being bullied based on looks and get dangerous transformations done to their bodies at premature ages. Due to these abnormal trends, the time has come when people's online profiles decide peoples' looks, levels of confidence and are responsible for the frustration for unpopularity for millions of their users. OSNs have increased the popularity for artificial beauty, as everyone seems to have at least one photo-editing app on their phones. OSNs are totally changing the total context of communication as the purpose of using OSNs was harmless, but later evolution of technology has turned them into dangerous monsters for innocent teenagers who suffer physical and mental disturbances due to the competition for popularity.

Online social media applications are causing more harm than help now, as it can be seen from the trend of texting more than talking, checking phones every few minutes, undergoing cosmetic surgeries only to achieve more number of 'likes' on an online profile. They try to bond with strangers without understanding the potential risks, post personal pictures online without

thinking who might use them for wrong purposes. They find these applications so reliable that they post their day-to-day activities on these sites, follow people of their interest. OSNs have cognitively impaired people and brought down their levels of judgment, self-esteem and confidence as they rely on OSNs to decide their looks. They have further changed the principle of communication as have connected unknown people and have separated known people from each other. An extreme level has been reached where the youth is getting drowned in the pool of social networking sites and action must soon be taken to reduce their addiction before they forget the real meaning of life and consider this virtual environment as their world and society.

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