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# Social Isolation and Technology: Implications for Psychosocial Development: A Theoretical Paper

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## **Keywords**

Human development, situated learning, and human learning

## SOCIAL ISOLATION AND TECHNOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT



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### Abstract

Advances in technology offer new frontiers in terms of conquering temporal dimensions, but with more significant advancements in technology, there is the possibility of having a diminished return in terms of interpersonal relationships. Without necessarily decrying technology as the culprit of a decrease in human social interaction, this conceptual paper discusses the opportunities provided to individuals through media encounters to be selective in their manner of communicating and the implications of this selectivity. This paper considers the complexity of human learning as based in situational, constructive, biological, and cognitive components underscored through the experiential, multisource nature of understanding. However, many encounters with individuals online become, at times an executive, superficial exchange of information aiming at highlighting the individual self. There is no doubt that technology can be a useful tool, but at the same time, considering the lack of opportunities for social interaction, technology may impede personal and social development in individuals. Therefore, while progress shapes the course of society, the individual may become a victim of society's progress. Fostering social development in today's cultural landscape offers both opportunities and challenges to enhance the connection of the personal and physical presence in the classroom. In this theoretical paper, we will utilize several theoretical frameworks dealing with social and personal development (Bandura, Erikson, Iran-Nejad, and Lave) and challenge readers to explore implications of isolation from technology for the psychosocial development of children, adolescents, and adults while incorporating current research on the issue.

### Introduction

At the advent of the Internet, there was speculation on how it could affect people's lives (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). It could foster communication through email and media sent over the Internet, but how would it affect relationships and socialization? There were two predominant views of its effects on social communication: 1) It could hurt offline relationships and lead to depression and loneliness (Bargh & McKenna, 2004), or 2) it would facilitate and maintain personal relationships (Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Stafford, Kline, & Dimmick, 1999). Bargh and McKenna (2004) have indicated that the Internet was vilified and feared, much like technological advances before it, because of its newness and the apprehension people had that it would cause the ruin of society. However, at the time, Bargh and McKenna also noted, "The main reason people use the Internet is to communicate with other people over email—and the principal reason why people send email messages to others is to maintain interpersonal relationships" (2004, p. 574). In other words, while society has been fearful of advances in technology, it also has held promise for

making people's lives more accessible, and in this case, making it easier to maintain relationships.

In the years following Bargh & McKenna's (2004) declaration, the Internet has seen a tremendous increase in use and changes in purpose. Maintaining social relationships has been only part of the advances in access to information and entertainment through the Internet. As Farfan (2013) discussed, "In fact, an entire generation has been brought up with the idea that 'socializing' includes an online component." Online communication has changed over the last several years so that social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are only some of the many ways people can maintain social contacts, and people no longer rely as much on email. For example, OnlineEducation.net (as cited in Pettijohn, LaPiene, & Horting, 2002) noted that as many as 96% of college students have a Facebook account. Therefore, while the beginning of the Internet saw limited interpersonal communication opportunities, the Internet has offered people new ways to interact. Internet users are no longer limited to email communication but can use social networking sites to form new friendships by allowing users to add "friends" and then keep up with their activities, status updates, favorite photos, and videos, as well as published updates in their offline status.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the theoretical implications of online communication considering developmental and learning paradigms. Psychological theories of learning, such as behaviorism, social learning, and theories of cognition, expand on the role of adaptation to the environment through interacting and acquiring an understanding of the world. If learning is based on interacting with others, does the interaction change when people interact through a computer instead of a person?

#### **Prior Research on Social Media and Relationships**

The study of the influence of social media on interpersonal relationships often yields conflicting results. For example, early research connected time spent "online" to several adverse outcomes; for example, addiction (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications and Media, 2011; Shields & Kane, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2006), lower grades in college students (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Wang, Chen, & Liang, 2011), or loneliness among high users (Morahan-Martin & Schumaker, 2000).

However, the results found were not understandable in Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011). Kalpidou et al. (2011) found that in a study of college students, upper-level students who had more Facebook friends reported higher levels of adjustment, although increased numbers of Facebook friends did not benefit first-year college students, where it was associated with decreased social and emotional adjustment. Likewise, Shields and Kane (2011) found a positive relationship between grade point average and the practice of starting the day using the Internet; however, they found a negative relationship between grade point average and listening to music online. Shields and Kane recommend that the key is to understand not just the amount of time spent online but the specific types of online use.

The context of Internet usage is a complicated situation that does not lend itself to simplistic explanations or relationships. Internet usage is not equivalent to social media use, and Shields and Kane (2011) indicated. The relationship between Internet use, social media, and affective factors are complicated and needs a more precise definition. For example, the very definition of being "online" has changed over the last two decades since smartphones have the capability of performing many of the same online functions as a computer, and more children and adolescents have access to their smartphones (Pew Research Center, 2019). According to the

Pew Research Center (2019), 96% of Americans now own a cell phone of some type, and 81% own smartphones, up from 35% in 2011. Also, 96% of adults ages 18-20 currently own smartphones. Pew Research Center (2019) also states that "one in five American adults are 'smartphone-only' Internet users." Smartphones allow users to search for information previously accessed through desktop or laptop computers. Through smartphones, users can upload content to social media or other groups for sharing with others.

However, "liking" something on social media does not mean that people have communicated. Facebook Help Center (2019) explains that the "like" function is "a way to let people know that you enjoy [the post] without leaving a comment." It would appear that one of the more popular ways for people to interact through Facebook was designed to avoid communication. Karen North echoes this view in the following statement, "People spend time peering into the lives of their friends, reading posts and updates, looking at photos and feeling that they are 'catching up' with that friend yet, frequently, people do not engage with that friend" (Manning-Schaffel, 2017). In other words, social media sites seem designed to connect people; however, interacting with social media may leave people the impression they have communicated with someone when they have not. Can this impression of communication described by North delay or hinder the development of communication skills once gained through in-person interaction?

### **Psychological Theories of Learning**

Psychology has provided significant insights into the nature of learning. For example, drawing from the theory of the survival of the fittest by Charles Darwin, evolutionary psychology, which studies how behavior evolves to enable survival, views learning as critical to survival because organisms must continue to adapt to an ever-changing world (Gluck, Mercado, & Myers, 2016). The human capacity to learn is vast and encompasses situations such as personal, technological, and social domains. Modern psychological learning theories indicate that human learning is a multifaceted experience in individuals, in contrast to the earlier theories based on the simplistic learning of simple organisms. The following paragraphs explain several learning theories that can illuminate the importance of experience in learning

The development of interpersonal skills is not a simple one or two-factor relationship. Like any complicated situation, interpersonal skills depend not on one person or the other, but the dynamics of communication between two people as well. Iran-Nejad (1990) and colleagues discussed the nature of learning as dependent on multiple sources of information and the importance of multiple sources of stimuli for creating a learning situation (Iran-Nejad & Cecil, 1992; Iran-Nejad, McKeachie, & Berliner, 2001). In a realistic setting where people interact face-to-face, there are multiple occasions for learning about oneself, the other person, and the context in which communication takes place. Multiple cues make the context of face-to-face communication one that informs people about how to empathize with others, how to contradict others, and how to be polite communicators. However, those cues are often absent from an online context, where the reader/responder must interpret emotion, intent, and motivation based on words on a screen. There is no inflection of voice or facial expression to indicate the underlying content of a phrase. In order to underscore the lack of emotion in these interactions, emojis have been created and added to electronic communication to make it less stilted. For example, Merriam-Webster (2019) defines an emoji as "any of various small images, symbols, or icons used in text fields in electronic communication (as in text messages, e-mail, and social media) to express the emotional attitude of the writer, convey information succinctly,

communicate a message playfully without using words, etc." Emojis provide a way to add emotion to a form of communication that generally would not convey it.

Another essential learning theory in understanding the importance of interacting in a situation for learning is Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of Learning (1991). According to Bandura, people learn not only by doing but also by observation. This learning theory is vital for examining the context of the development of social skills and interpersonal communication because of the difficulty of directly measuring or observing interpersonal interactions online. There are actions and reactions, such as posting a status update on Facebook and then seeing friends "like" it. However, this is not the same as saying something to a friend's face, observing their facial expressions, and hearing their tone of voice as they respond. All of these provide the productive contextual environment supporting multisource learning.

Another part of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory states that learning depends on self-efficacy, or how much a person feels he or she can imitate a behavior (Woolfolk, 2012). Steyn and Mynhardt (2008) found that our most significant source of self-efficacy was individual mastery experiences (Woolfolk, 2012). When communicating online, people do not have access to multiple sources of stimuli that foster mastery. For example, receiving an email from a friend whom you have not seen for several years is a pleasant experience, but to embrace that friend or hear his/her voice would be a different phenomenon. This episode would be more organic and lead to embodied cognition of the situation.

One final learning theory pertinent to the topic is Lave and Werner's (1991) situated learning. Lave and Werner argued that learning should be situated, driven by culture. It also involves a series of interactions taking place between learners. Situated learning states that learning is connected to a context. For Lave and Wenger, communities of practice which form the context for learning on regular interaction, something that does not always happen in the virtual worlds. While social media can create a context, it tends to be flat without the richness of in-person experiences. Virtual realities allow users to create identities that are not real and then to interact at a distance through a medium to someone else, who may or may not accurately represent themselves. The interaction is implicit, much like North's assertion that social media allows people to "observe" their friends instead of engaging with them (Manning-Schaffel, 2017).

### **Psychosocial Stages of Development**

Erikson stages of psychosocial development, each stage represent a crisis to resolve at each stage before one can successfully develop to the next stage (Erikson, 1959). With successful resolution, the individual can move on to higher stages and affront new crises. Each stage in life represents a new challenge. According to Erikson, the stages are psychosocial because the successful resolution of previous stages influences our ability to be successful at a future relationship and psyche building. For example, according to Erikson's theory, the individual who does not learn to trust caregivers their needs will have greater difficulty learning to build significant relationships later in life in the Intimacy vs. Isolation stage. The relationship of psychosocial stages, then, is that stage progression affects and is affected by our ability to resolve the crisis at each point in life. The stages are interconnected and linear, and therefore, individuals are forced to resolve the crises at each stage in order not to hinder later development.

The question, then, is whether online relationships, defined as relationships, through virtual communication as opposed to in-person contact, provide the same types of multisource contexts as face-to-face relationships. Little is known about how virtual relationships may or

may not help adolescents and adults resolve the psychosocial crises of identity and intimate relationships.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Communication**

Several studies have looked at whether online communication is a positive or negative experience. Farfan (2013) examined the use of the Internet for socially anxious people. He found that socially anxious people were also likely to be anxious about communicating online, and therefore, make more posts that were negative and drew adverse reactions from others. Although communication facilitated by the Internet has the potential to be a positive experience for the socially anxious, social media use may mimic offline or face-to-face interactions in this case. Those who are socially skilled tend to have more “friends” online, communicate more frequently online, and communicate online with more skill (Shields & Kane, 2011).

Several researchers have found that negative postings in social media can affect readers’ emotions. For example, Coviello et al. (2013) found that negative and positive postings were contagious. They found that negative postings on social media about the weather affected readers’ moods in other parts of the world, even if they were experiencing good weather. Forest and Wood (2011) reported that posters to social media who are more unskilled socially in their offline relationships used more negative postings, which may keep people from making closer ties with them. Shields and Kane (2011) observed that in many instances, the relationships people have on Facebook are like those in their offline worlds. It is not surprising, then, that participants who claimed to be socially anxious or socially awkward made postings on social media that were negative or had people respond to them in negative ways (Stein & Stein, 2008). Murray Law (2005) made similar findings of ruminators. Rumination does not draw people to one’s aid and support, but it can drive that support away, and it can fuel depression.

The very nature of online communication allows people to experiment with identity creation and presentation, in which they may present an actual self, a false self, or the desired self. Adolescents may find it a comfortable stage to try out new identities as they are exploring who they are. Because communication occurs virtually, users do not have to create accurate profiles or presentations of themselves (Myers, 1987), and in other circumstances, users may feel that they are only presenting their true nature online while those who know them in person. Zarghooni (2007) termed this a detached self-presentation because the user may become conscious of the differences in their two self-concepts and dissatisfied with their present state. However, the opposite can also be true that the distance created between the online and in-person self acts as a buffer for negative remarks and self-image. The fact that authenticity in relationships is expected from social media users (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) while accepting that online communication allows for concealment of identity (Zarghooni, 2007) presents additional dilemmas for individuals who are compounded through the online medium.

### **Conclusion**

Technology has changed the business of human interaction. While technology has eclipsed time, space, and reality, one cannot but wonder as to its implication to the personal and social development of youth. While the utilization of technology in our current society has made men and women almost virtually omnipresent, the opposite side of the spectrum is the potential for diminishing opportunities in face-to-face relationships. Fast emerging technologies have profound implications to society, schools, and most importantly, youths. However, progress is always moving forward. While there will always be a place for social interaction online, it is necessary to investigate the potential impact online communication may have to the

development and longstanding relationships among humans. A constant investigation must occur because technology is always changing and improving. Online social interaction among humans can be a positive or hindering experience. While it can bring people closer together, it can also isolate people, as anyone sitting in a room full of people texting, listening to music, watching videos, or updating social media can attest.

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