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Life Online

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Hundreds of thousands of years of evolution have brought us to this moment here in life. Society has spent a vast amount of time dreaming of the future. Science fiction was filled with seemingly far-fetched visions of being able to talk to one another through a computer. Technology has become impressive enough to give us this amazing ability. We can instantly connect to someone miles away. However, we're apparently not happy with this. Many are actually *disappointed* that we can share messages with one another in this way. Some say that because of this technology our face time is dwindling day by day and all that we see of each other now is text instantly displayed on a screen, making us into lonely, socially inept creatures (Markoff 1). To one another, we're simply text. This idea disheartens many people. These are the people who don't understand the real benefits of online interaction. The common misconception about Internet socialization is that the impersonality of it degrades the quality of the communication. They fail to see that communication through text is *not* a bad thing. I firmly believe that communication online can strengthen relationships between people in many ways.

First, it should be stated that online communication doesn't just improve the quality of relationships; it can also increase the quantity of relationships. I think this is an especially important aspect in analyzing the way the Internet has affected socializing. Before diving right into the topic of Internet's affect on relationship quantity, it's necessary to explain the situation as I see it when it come to socializing in general. Scientists have found that we actually have a maximum amount of relationships that we can handle at a personal level. (Note:

When I say “relationships,” I mean those that already exist offline and aren’t necessarily—but can include—romantic relationships; they could also be family, friendships, etc.) 150 people is this maximum (Wong 1). We cannot handle any more than that because our brains honestly just can’t remember and think about people in the same way. The relationships can be collectively referred to as “The Monkeysphere” (Wong 1). We no longer identify with anyone outside of this Monkeysphere at a personal level other than basic, subhuman labels, e.g. delivery person, grocery bagger, et cetera.

I believe that the Internet can increase this Monkeysphere. The reason is that I have found, through Facebook and online forums, that I can communicate with more people at once. Before starting college, I was able to find my future classmates on Facebook and get to know them. I was expanding my Monkeysphere before even arriving to the state. There are some who argue that social networking sites do not actually increase the Monkeysphere because a person generally has on average just over 100 friends on his or her list, which is under the 150 maximum, and only regularly contact approximately 10 of them (Milian 1). In his brief article, Mark Milian provides a generalized piece of evidence to prove that relationships are unchanged quantitatively speaking, but I have found exception to his conclusion through personal experience. I don’t expect everyone, though, to concede to the notion that online networking can increase a person’s Monkeysphere.

Additionally, the overall quality of my Monkeysphere has positively increased. Facebook is a nifty, easy way to keep in touch with all of my friends.

At a glance, I can see what all of my friends are doing. I'm up-to-date on all of their personal lives. Likewise, they are up-to-date on my life. As a very busy college student, I like that I don't have to disappear from my friends' lives. I don't always have the time to see each and every one of them and talk to them about what's going on in his or her life; I wish I did. Lisa Selin Davis is critical of Facebook in her article "Does Facebook Replace Face Time or Enhance It?" She goes so far as to say that those who use the site are "social hermits" who have "Facebook Recluse Syndrome." Davis is a Facebook user herself and, at the end of her article, states appreciatively that she felt very close to her offline but distant friend. She knew all about the things that had been going on in her friend's daily life thanks to Facebook. This serves as evidence that social networking online can enhance the quality of a person's relationships, even to a woman who is skeptically critical of Facebook.

Of course, one may argue that just *knowing* things about a friend doesn't necessarily mean that there's quality to the relationship. What defines the quality of a relationship? Well, that's a personal insight. Is it being physically close? I don't think so. I have plenty of friends I don't hug but would still say that I'm close to. So what's being "close" then? My definition is how much I would tell them of any given topic at any given time. I honestly feel that sharing information about myself is largely what ties me to other people. My willingness to share my thoughts and feelings reflects on how close I am to that person. The effectiveness of this sharing offline versus online is debatable. It might seem like I could get more out of, say, telling my friend I like his shirt in person as opposed

to just commenting on a photo of him wearing the shirt. It's likely that he'll forget I ever said that, whereas the comment will forever be on that photo, always reminding him of the nice thing I said. That is the way in which the Internet and "just text" can be much more effective in communication; it lasts.

Of course, that message is there for all to see—generally speaking. (Naturally, sites provide the option to set certain posted items to have specific privacy settings and such.) Some would say that these social sites provide endless opportunities for nosiness and/or stalking. They very well can. There is also worry that they even lead to very negative passive aggressive behavior (Meyer 1). This is also true. However, I'm sure the inventor of the ski mask had very good intentions as well. Do convenient store owners blame whoever invented the ski mask for anonymous thievery? I daresay not. Likewise, should we blame the social networking site itself because someone posted something mean about someone else? It's not something wrong with system; it's what's inherent in basic human social behavior. Mark Milian's criticism of online social networking in his article was that people were passive aggressive *because* of sites like MySpace and Facebook. This can be quickly and easily countered with the saying, "You get out of it whatever you put in" (Guzman 1). Simply put, nice people don't do mean things; mean people do mean things.

One might try to make the case, for example, that Little Sally was a really nice girl in person, but when she got behind an evil computer, she went drunk with the sweet, intoxicating power of quasi-anonymity and the lack of "instant feedback," like what we normally get in face-to-face interaction (Milian 1). She

said things that weren't what she'd usually say just because of that. This is simply finding a scapegoat. Little Sally was obviously already thinking those things. She's the one that makes the decisions, and if she decided to post unkind things on someone's profile, that just reflects on who she is as a person. You honestly can't just completely abandon who you are as a person online. It will always come out. Even if you do try to hide it, people will know, and they generally won't respond well to it (Guzman 1).

In addition to the concern of questionable identities on the internet, impersonality is also another commonly mentioned issue (Tatum 1). The people who bring up this issue are the people who don't see the power in writing. As a writer, I know full well how much can be conveyed in writing. I can relate my true personality to another person better if I write it than if I tell him or her verbally. In all of my e-mails and instant messages, I translate my voice to text, including all the humor and common phrases that I'm known to use. This essentially eliminates the impersonality. There are obvious benefits in the way I choose to communicate online because I can see my own text. Not only am I honing my writing skills, but I'm also taking the time to see what I put down, enabling me to learn more about myself. I believe that anything I can say in person can also be said just as well in text; it just takes knowing how to write. If we know our own languages as well as we pretend to, then this shouldn't be a problem for anyone.

Taking this idea of expression further, technology has allowed us to be able to convey our thoughts and feelings in more ways online than with just text. Online video games have created an entirely new way for individuals to interact

with one another. Some believe that they may in fact change the way we communicate with one another by changing how we express our ideas. Through the use of symbols and avatars in games, we find new ways to understand our thoughts and feelings in ways that weren't possible with just text (Lanier 1). This is a much more abstract topic, but I believe that if we get a better understanding of ourselves, then communication with one another becomes easier and clearer. This analysis approach of the Internet's effect on relationships involves the consideration of the evolution of language itself, which some may not be willing to take into account.

A much more practical and direct application of the Internet to relationships can be found in online dating services. These haven't had the greatest media attention with people reporting cases of supposed young women turning out to be older men (Toufexis 1). However, when people are serious about it (and for the most part, they are), the relationships that form come with a much greater feeling of structure than the average relationship (Brooks 1). The usual, petty pressures of having to look a certain way or act a certain way disappear because the relationship becomes about compatibility instead. People look for much deeper aspects of personality as opposed to just how a person looks or acts in a given circumstance, such as a bar. The Internet has also proven itself in loves that would otherwise be forbidden. A couple in Iraq from differing sects found themselves in love but unable to be together. The Internet provided a means for them to stay connected (Ghosh 2). Does this happen

everyday? No, it doesn't, but it's definitely something to take into consideration when analyzing the Internet's effect on relationships.

The Internet has the power to bring people close; more can be added to any given relationship through the Internet. Families can keep in contact with one another through long distances. Friends can quickly and easily keep up with what each other is doing. Lovers can find each other and participate in unbridled communication without fear. With the power of language, the Internet makes all of this possible—and so much more. Just as technology has changed, the very way in which we communicate may come to change as well. I can only hope that people will accept it and embrace it with accepting and open arms; I know I will. In the meantime, I will continue contributing to technology's evolution by interacting with those I know in whatever new, exciting ways science comes up with.

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