

Suzie Smith

Wittwer/Hankins/Konkol

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Social Networking Sites: Losing Sight of How to Socialize

Andrew is a typical teenager, a freshman, and like many teenagers today, he wants the latest shoe style, seems to always have headphones in, is part of the wrestling team, and does an average job in school. What also makes Andrew typical is what he does when he is not at school. Most parents do not know that their teenager is engaged in the activity. It is a tragic scene. Each user's room is different, but they all have a few things in common: dirty dishes stacked in the corner; no natural light because the curtains are drawn to hide the sadness inside; energy drinks litter the floor; and a stale, musty odor that permeates the room. At the center of this mess is a computer. These teenagers are addicted to what is on their computer. Addicted to social networking sites. Addicted. Social networking sites have been around for over a decade, used mostly by computer programmers, but have not gained a mainstream following until the advent of Myspace, and more recently, Facebook and Twitter. By 2009, Facebook is so ubiquitous that it is noun and verb. Nearly 72 % of the population has at least one social network profile online (Moerdyck). A social network is any web site where users create an online profile and connect with other users via text, photos, or video. Users then build "connections" between other users with the intention of creating valuable associations. This does not always happen. With the increase of social networking sites, a question is raised—How do social networking websites affect society? Social networking web sites cause isolation as shown by seclusion at home, exclusion from social experiences, and delusion of true friendship.

One way that social networking web sites create isolation is through the seclusion of the user at home. With the increase of users on SNS, it has become an addition to many, always wondering what new updates are on their profile; who posted a photo from school; and if their comment about their favorite movie was “liked” by their friends. Most people have their computer at home, the advent of smart phone, phones capable of running the Internet, being a recent device of distraction. Most use their computer at home where “every hour … spent on a social networking web site is another hour spent alone” (Sexton and English). Already, today’s teenagers spend an alarming number of hours in front of a screen (TV, computer, game, phone) so every time a teenagers logs on to a SNS, he is removing himself from actual, in-person, socializing such playing outside with friends or talking about his day with his parents while sitting on the porch. These people care about him. His 3041 “friends” on Facebook do not care. One hour of talking with a neighbor will lead to socializing with a flesh-and-blood person, a person with whom he can learn social skills. However, what is happening to teenagers, at an alarming rate, is that teenagers are loosing their ability to socialize appropriately. They are becoming socially retarded. Another way teens experience isolation in their homes is through the exclusion from social experiences. In the article *Caught in the Web*, by Current Events, the life of a young man named Alex is discussed and how his life went from dream to destroyed due to an online game called World of Warcraft where he would “often fall asleep at [his] computer” after playing the game for 16 hours a day (Current Events). Alex, like many users, turn to online sites as a way to be social and report that it is “an easier way to make new friends than at school” (Current Events). However, persistent use of online sites and games removes the user from interacting with people in life. If a teenager has 4 hours of free time after school and he spends

all of it on a computer, he has lost 4 hours. These hours cannot be made up. Moreover, as the user uses online social groups more and more, it becomes increasingly easy to continue to use, to avoid going out and interacting with people in person. The user eventually becomes complacent in his online world, stuck in his life. A third way that social experiences are hindered by online social networks is the allure delusion of true friendship. Social networking web sites create the illusion of a social place because most users are engaged in activities that they, themselves, would describe as social. However, the quality of this social activity is low, even dangerous. Most users of SNS “friend” more people than those they know in real life. This connects the user to others, others the user does not know. Sexton and English, in their article, warn of the dangers to be found on SNS such as “... thousands of people trawling the profile photos on social networking sites in search of the young and naïve” (Sexton and English). The high volume of teenage users visiting social network sites creates a cause for concern. If only a hundred people used SNS daily, that would not constitute a critical mass of people. However, an estimated 45 million users under the age of eighteen are users of SNS. This is a mass of users is does not have “... the worldly experience and mature judgment needed to negotiate the Internet safely ...” (Sexton and English). Isolation is created when people are not together, in real time, in real space. Friendship cannot occur through fiber optics and wires, through screens and devices, nor through usernames and icons.

Social networks seclude the user at home, exclude the user from social experiences and delude the user of what true friendship is, all along isolating the user more and more each day from people. When MySpace captured the loyalty of teens half a decade ago, the concern of parents rose just as strongly. Today, MySpace is not the number one online social networking site. Facebook and Twitter appear to have the hold on the social network world. At least until

something shinier comes along. Society's use and comfort with SNS has increased dramatically over the last few years. Social network connections appear everywhere, even in the most unexpected places. A television show having a Facebook page may seem appropriate. However, banks have Twitter accounts now, tweeting their loan percentages. At what point does the preponderance of online noise become too much? When the Pope has a Facebook page? It is understood that social networking sites can provide what is called "third space" in the article, *Social Networking Websites Provide a Healthy Way to Improve Friendships* (Whittaker and Wagner). Third spaces let teens play with their persona and build friendships in a virtual place that is not governed by the rules of home or the pressures of school. However, it is not required that these third spaces be virtual spaces. What happened to hanging out at a mall or park? What about gathering around a bench and talking? These teenagers will end up like Andrew, the freshman who likes to wrestle. By second semester Andrew will fail his English class. His parents think that he is working on his research paper when, in fact, he is really playing World of Warcraft and chatting with someone in England named suzycar002. Given the extent to which society is married with technology, it is important to be educated on the shortcomings. Social networking sites have their place. However, that place is not as a central fixture in a teen's life. If a teenager wastes his life, this will negatively impact society. Parents should be aware of their children's use on a computer, and limit that use.

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