

**Question: Has social networking improved the quality of relationships in society?
Write an essay of between 1800-2000 words, clearly stating your view on the issue.**

Introduction

Social networking has had a major influence on society in the 21st century, enabling citizens to engage with each other in radically new and different ways. According to Brown (2011), we can fall in love online, create friendships, attend parties in other countries – all without leaving the comfort (and anonymity) of our armchair. And while the Generation Ys and Xs in our society are leading the adoption of the emerging social networking websites, it has been noted that the older generations are now catching up, with the strongest recent growth in usage among the 55 and 65 age group (Burbary 2010). So what does this apparent 'revolution' mean for society? How is social networking changing the way people relate to each other, and can we say that it has led to an improvement in relationships? **This essay will argue that in the area social and political awareness, social networking has had a strongly positive effect. In other areas of society however, there is cause for some concern.**

Background to social networking

The idea of a 'social network' is not new. A social network in fact refers to any structure made up of individuals (or organizations) tied to one another through some type of interdependency, such as friendship, common interest, financial exchange and so on (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 2011). What is radically new however, is web-based social networking, which has allowed these networked structures to develop in much more extensive and elaborated ways. Beginning with specialised online communities in the 1990s such as Geocities and Tripod.com, online social networking became a mass phenomenon in the 2000s with the development of individual user profile functions, and enhanced capacity to share activities, and interests within individual networks. Nowadays, the main social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter enjoy huge success, with Facebook – arguably the most successful of these – boasting more than 750 million users worldwide.

The appeal of social networking seems to vary. Some surveys point to more pragmatic social motives such as "staying in touch with friends, organising social activities, or flirting with someone" (Lenhart & Madden 2007, p. 23). Other studies however, allude to deeper psychological needs such as the need for a sense of belonging, or the need to project one's identity (Ridings & Gefen 2004). Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, is sure that the chief appeal comes from social networking's ability to empower people by giving them a 'voice'. He is also sure that this capacity has meant that his technological creation has been overwhelmingly a force for good.

When you give everyone a voice and give people power, the system usually ends up in a really good place. So, what we view our role as, is giving people that power (cited in Ali 2011)

But is such a positive view of the impact of social networking justified?

Activity

1. Look at the essay question on the left on the effects of social networking.
2. Now read the sample essay. Read the accompanying comments below as you go.
3. **Note: this is high standard work that demonstrates a number of features of good academic writing. Which features of the essay do you think you could draw on in your own writing?**

This last sentence of the introduction presents the students' ARGUMENT. We can think of the ARGUMENT as the students particular ANSWER to the question being posed. Your lecturers will be appreciative of any essay that has a clearly stated argument.

This is an example of a SUB-HEADING. Subheadings help to show the structure of your essay. However, they should be used fairly sparingly in essay writing.

This is an example of a CITATION. Note that in this case some of the actual words from the original text have been used, indicated with "quotation marks". When you use a DIRECT QUOTE, you also need to include the pages number.

This is an example of a BLOCK QUOTE. Use these when the quote you wish to use is more than one sentence. BLOCK QUOTES should be in a smaller font and separated from the rest of the text.

After presenting this background material, the student reminds us of the key ISSUE of the essay i.e. has social networking had a positive influence?

Effects of social networking on social relationships

In order to understand the effects that the new media have had on social relationships, it is necessary to break the term 'relationship' into three elements: relationship with the broader community, relationships with 'friends', and relationship with self.

In terms of the relationship with the broader (sometimes global) community, there is much evidence to suggest that the social media user has a greater awareness of social issues (Shirky 2011). As a result of this greater access to information, many social media users have a strengthened relationship with the broader community, with a more immediate ability to become involved in collective action (Shirky 2011).

This activist dimension of the web has been particularly evident in a number of popular struggles against repressive governments in recent times. In Iran, for example, social networking became crucial in the revolt of the citizenry against the country's presidential elections held in 2009, and widely believed to be rigged. In response to the government's monopoly over conventional media (newspapers, television and radio), many Iranians turned to social-networking tools both to circulate alternative sources of news, and to organise a dramatic series of street demonstrations against the government (Carafano 2009). A similar dynamic was seen in the Egyptian revolution, where Facebook is acknowledged to have played a major role in organising the demonstrations that were eventually to bring down President Mubarak. According to Wael Ghonim, a key activist in the Egyptian uprising:

This revolution started [...] in June 2010 when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians started collaborating content. We would post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 60,000 people on their walls within a few hours. I've always said that if you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet (cited in Huffington Post 2011)

Clay Shirky, a major commentator on social media is most optimistic about the potential of the new networking technologies to bring about significant social change. Shirky suggests that the distinguishing feature of web 2.0 technologies is that they have moved beyond the 20th century paradigm of passive media consumption to one of active participation. This shift from consumption to action, Shirky argues, has the potential to free up human creativity, and to be a spur for major collective change: "Our social tools are not an improvement to modern society", he says; "they are a challenge to it" (Shirky 2008, p.25).

While social networking has become justly famous in the world of politics and social struggle, its more common and widespread use is in the more local domain of personal relationships. In this area we can also see many positive developments. On a basic level, social networking sites have proven to be a very efficient way of establishing and maintaining relationships with friends and relatives. On this score, a recent survey of US college students found that the most attractive feature of Facebook was its ability to help users track down old school friends (Pempek et al. 2009). Another undoubted appeal is the role that social networking can play in facilitating romantic relationships, although evidence suggests that the extent of this use may be overestimated (Pempek et al. 2009). Perhaps the most powerful use in this form of relationship building is the development of networks around shared interests and circumstances. Social networking has become a dynamic way for the young to build relationships around cultural interests and artifacts; it can also support close online communities around the idea of self-help, for example, among sufferers of certain medical conditions (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar 2005).

There are however a number of worrying aspects about this interpersonal dimension of social media. Some studies have shown that the quality of relationships with friends can deteriorate where social media has replaced face-to-face communication (Kujath 2011). There is the suggestions too that in spite of the greater interconnectedness it creates, social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace can in fact leave some people feeling more lonely and isolated (Cacioppo & Patrick 2009). As Cacioppo and Patrick (2009, p.46) explain: "For people who are already feeling lonely, Facebook status updates are just a reminder of how much better everyone else is at making friends and having fun". Elaborating on this idea, Sherry Turkle (2011), from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a strong critic of the social effects of the new media suggests that:

This opening sentence indicates how the student is going to ANALYSE the topic i.e. by referring to these three ELEMENTS of relationships.

This a good example of how the student uses specific INSTANCES or EXAMPLES to support what they are saying

This is another example of a BLOCK QUOTE. The 'cited in' label indicates that the student read this quote not in an article by the author ('Wael Ghonim'), but in another text that quoted this author.

This paragraph provides a summary of the ideas of a key AUTHOR on this topic - Clay Shirky. Notice how Shirky is front and centre in this particular stretch of writing:

Clay Shirky ... is optimistic about ...
Shirky suggests that...
Shirky argues that...
He (Shirky) says ...

It is always a good move to find opportunities in your essays to engage with key IDEAS in this way.

Notice how the student indicates clearly that they are moving on to the next ELEMENT of social relationships.

The 'et al.' is short for et alia (Latin for 'and others'). You use this when the source has more than two authors. All author names are included in the list of references.

This paragraph indicates a shift in the discussion. Recall that the students' argument is: "While social networking has had positive effects in the area of social and political awareness, in other areas there is cause for some concern". Here the student is moving on to discuss some of these concerns.

New topics are introduced in an essay by the use of strong TOPIC SENTENCES. These are sentences at the beginning of a paragraph that clearly signpost the direction of the essay.

Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed - and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing (Turkle 2011, p.25).

An area of particular concern in social relationships is cyberbullying. While bullying behavior among peers has always been a part of society, it seems that social networking creates opportunities for this to happen in particularly intense and ways. This is attributed to certain characteristics inherent in online technologies, including the ability to remain anonymous while engaged in social networking activity, and also the networking capacity of social media, which allows bullies to gang up on victims in a much more efficient and relentless manner than in face-to-face situations (Patchin 2008). This networking also means that acts of bullying can be witnessed by numerous spectators, creating further humiliation for victims. The potentially devastating effects of this use of social networking have been seen in a number of high profile cases, including that of Ryan Halligan, a thirteen year old school boy in the US, who was driven to suicide after receiving repeated instant messages from school classmates accusing him of being gay. An outcome of the case was changes in the laws, with the introduction of anti-bullying legislation across a number of US states. Although cases like the Halligan one are extreme, a recent US survey found that as many as 40% of college students reported experiencing some form of cyberbullying (Patchin 2008).

This paragraph opening signals additional discussion about the negative effects of social networking. Note the use of a strong TOPIC SENTENCE.

In this paragraph opening, the student indicates the final area to be covered.

A final area to consider is the effect that social networking has on relationships with the 'self'. One of the interesting features of social media sites such as Facebook, is that they give users an opportunity to shape and construct their social identity. Some commentators have seen this as a positive development. Thus, it is suggested that social media gives people much more control over their self-appearance than in face-to-face communication, allowing them to project a positive image of themselves to the world (Kramer & Winter 2008). This 'control' makes the social media world particularly attractive to shy and introverted people, who may have difficulty expressing their identity in regular off line relationships (Aubrey 2008).

This is a good way to introduce ideas from the LITERATURE. Some of these 'commentators' are then referenced in the remainder of the paragraph i.e. (Kramer and Winter, 2008; Aubrey, 2008)

You will see another example of this at the beginning of the next paragraph: "Some writers..." The ideas of these writers are introduced to emphasize additional concerns about social networking.

Some writers however, are critical of the way that social networking seems to draw users into having such a strong focus on themselves and their personal identities (Rosen, 2007). The concern is that social media sites in fact offer a ready-made vehicle for self promotion and vanity via self descriptions and photographs, and are also encouraging of shallow superficial relationships with so-called 'friends' (Buffardi & Campbell, 2010). In an interesting study, Buffardi and Campbell (2010) found that people with 'narcissistic' personality traits tended to be the greatest users of social media. It is not clear from the study whether social media actually promotes 'narcissism' or whether it is just a tool embraced by those who are already this way inclined. Nevertheless, the focus on self via this media is increasingly a cause for some concern (Rosen, 2007).

This is the student's CONCLUSION. As shown here, a good way to begin a conclusion is to restate the essay's central ARGUMENT.

Overall social networking's effect on social relations seems to be a mixed one. While one can point to many benefits it has brought, especially in the area of political engagement and activism, there are some areas in our personal relationships where the influence has not been a positive one. Perhaps the area of most concern is the phenomenon of cyberbullying which points to a worrying deterioration in social relationships. One certainty though, is that social media is now embedded in the social fabric, and its influence and usage is only likely to grow. The challenge for society will be to keep pace with this change, and to try to ensure that this new kind of 'voice' bestowed on citizens is overwhelmingly an affirming and mutually-respectful one. As social networking becomes more and more a part of our lives, it will be interesting to see how this challenge is met.

While you should avoid introducing any substantially new material into the CONCLUSION, it is good to wind up with some general reflection or speculation on the ISSUE. Check how this student has rounded the essay off.

1900 words

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The last section of your essay is the list of REFERENCES. References are listed in alphabetical order, and should provide all relevant details about the source you have used. You should check the format to be used in the library's Harvard Style Guide.

Note that you should only list those sources that have been CITED in the essay. This student has referred to a lot of sources.

You may find that it is not necessary to use sources so abundantly in assignments you are set to do. Keep in mind though that evidence of wide reading is something that your lecturers will always appreciate in your work.

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