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Societal Scrutiny of Social Sites

Waking up? Check Facebook. Eating breakfast? Upload a picture on Instagram. Having a bad day at work? Tweet about it. At the gym? Make sure you put it on your Snapchat story. Everyone has or knows someone who has at least one of these social media sites. We use these apps everyday to talk to our networking circle, and think it's weird when people don't have an online account. Undoubtedly, social media is deeply intertwined into our society, but how did it root itself there?

Throughout the course of history, inhabitants of our society invented numerous ways to communicate with one another that range from using hieroglyphs, telegraph, and telephone. Even animals --primarily birds-- have been trained to deliver messages to people in the past. September 1969 marked the birth of the internet (then known as ARPANET), symbolizing the origin of the gradual process of new ideas and concepts that have stemmed off of each other since. The transition into the 21st century was illustrated by a plethora of sprouting technological advances which have rejuvenated former communication practices, making it less troublesome for people to interact with each other through the usage of social media sites. Social media is ubiquitous in today's society with its pool of users continuing to grow on a daily basis.

According to a study conducted in 2015 by Pew Research Center, about two-thirds of adults in America (65%) are using social media compared to only 7% recorded a decade ago. Statistics also indicate that 90% of young adults in today's age use social media sites compared to only

12% recorded in 2005. Even seniors are making a stomp on these sites with 35% usage compared to 2%. Regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, racial background, and location, records show that there is an overall increase of people utilizing online sites to interact and exchange information with each other. As a result of the increased globalizing trend of social media sites, a myriad of polarized discussions have surfaced on the issue. On one hand, proponents corroborate the idea that these online sites create more readily accessible information and a more global connection amongst our population. On the other hand, opponents complain that social media creates more conflict regarding the diffusion of false information and facade of weakened productivity.

In their article for the *Harvard Business Review*, “Conquering Digital Distraction,” Larry Rosen, a psychologist, and Alexandra Samuel, a technologist, denounce the usage of online networking sites in regards to its effects on the population. Rosen and Samuel criticizes society’s relationship with social networks asserting that “[w]e waste time, attention, and energy on relatively unimportant information and interactions, staying busy but producing little of value... The result is reduced productivity and engagement, both in the office and at home.” In other words, Rosen and Samuel view social media simply as a distraction that portrays an impediment to productivity inside and outside of the workplace. They argue that social media combined with internet information overload makes it hard for employees to meet expectations and perform well at work, “costing the economy \$977 billion annually.”

In my view, however, social media is a factor of our society that is so deeply rooted that it cannot be separated. Online networkings sites provide us more access to all the news updates, even those not reported by television. From the communicational perspective, it unites everyone across the globe, enabling us to strengthen and encourage our relationships, making people live

improved and happier lives. Individuals are not the only ones that can take advantage of these sites. Social media can also help from a business and organizational standpoint making global and local business interactions and transactions easier. Social media sites will only aid in societal development and growth--even if there are minor setbacks--due to the myriad of benefits it provides.

One of the most evident advantages that online networking sites provide is increased connection. These sites are a crucial element that represent a glue holding together our population on a global scale. Social media platforms are a primary news source for today's population, specifically millennials. This enables people from different countries and continents to be aware of local events that are happening in other places--such as natural disasters targeting a specific area--and global instances that affect Earth's population as a whole. Many Americans, myself included, spend more time scouring Facebook and Twitter feeds for the latest news and updates than watching Channel 9 news. Social networking sites are reckoned to spread information faster than any other form of media. Kristin Marino's article, "Social Media: The New News Source," contains a set of statistics regarding how people have obtained their news. It's recorded that "over 50% of people have learned about breaking news via social media rather than official news sources." It is now one of the top news sources and is expected to replace more traditional platforms. Various types of news (i.e. sports, medicine, economy, etc.) keeps users engaged and involved. Networking sites allow you to look at specific categories that users are interested in as opposed to general news that people may or may not wish to see. Obtaining news from social media platforms is also very convenient for people who are constantly on the go and do not have time to pick up a newspaper or sit back and watch television. Busy moms can

pull up the latest news at the touch of a button on her phone while tending to other work, and business professionals can stay updated in the media while traveling to their next meeting.

Due to this efficiency of news diffusion that social media provides, however, a concern arises on the spread of invalid information. Referencing back to Marino's article, opponents call attention to the "49.1% of people [who have] heard breaking news via social media that turned out to be false." In another article, written by Sam Laird, Mashable's Senior Sports Reporter, titled, "Twitter Troll Who Posted Fake Sandy News Apologizes to the Internet," a New York City hedge fund analyst tweeted out false information "that began with 'BREAKING,' claiming that "the floor of the New York Stock Exchange had been flooded" and that the "power company... would cut off service to all of Manhattan." This greatly alarmed the public as his messages were retweeted and reported on by the national media. That is to say that people who are against social media argue that online news is not trustworthy and reliable. Opponents are right when they claim that information on sites such as Facebook and Twitter can be false, however they seem on a more dubious ground if they have priorly assumed that all of the information found online is true. This would be similar to believing everything you hear in person. It is already expected that not everything published in the media, including social networking sites, is always factual. It should be anticipated that not everything presented online is true, especially considering the fact that we live in a world bombarded with many different opinions and ideas.

Rosen and Samuel are not the only major opposers of social media usage. Whereas they criticize the decreased productivity and engagement of our society, Maura Keller, a Minneapolis-based writer and editor, excoriates social media from the communicational perspective. In her article, "Social Media and Interpersonal Communication," Keller argues that by social

networking sites, society faces a severe decline in our face-to-face interaction which could be detrimental to our social skills, as many other contenders have added. After viewing a study showing that social media is being a more preferred method of communication conducted by Paul Booth, a professor at DePaul University, Keller insists that “our interactions on social media tend to be weak ties--that is, we don’t feel as personally connected to the people at the other end of our communication as we do when we’re face-to-face.” She also includes one of Booth’s supporting statements: ““So while we’re communicating more, we may not necessarily be building relationships as strongly[.]”” In other words, Keller and Booth are trying to convey that we are always online sending instant messages, creating meaningless relationships, instead of meeting with each other in person to deepen existing ones. Although I agree with Keller and Booth up to a point, I cannot accept their overriding assumption that social media acts as a replacement for face-to-face human interaction. Relationships made online are certainly not “weak” either. As a matter of fact, social networking are actually proven to facilitate face-to-face interaction. According to a study by ExactTarget, an email marketing firm,”[46% of Twitter users] meet friends in person more and 7% meet them less.” Additionally, take a look at networking sites like Tinder and Match.com, for example. These are online social sites that people use to meet new people and date. A lot of my close friends are currently in relationships with people they meet online. One of my coworkers is even married to someone he met on eHarmony. Would that be considered “weak?” Online networking sites were constructed as tools to strengthen online and offline relationships, not discontinue face-to-face communication. Social media has indeed allowed me to continually keep in touch with my network circle. More specifically, it has solidified my relationships with family members who are not currently living in the United States. I’ve met so many different friends online, all with diverse backgrounds.

They reside in various places ranging from Texas, Maine, and even South Korea! I've met some of them in person as well and we frequently keep in contact. Furthermore, according to a research study conducted on teenagers in June of 2012 by Common Sense Media, "[m]ore than one in four teen[agers] say that using their social networking site makes them feel less shy and more outgoing; one in five says it makes them feel more confident... and more sympathetic to others." Not only does social media seek to improve teenagers' social lives, it also helps adults maximize their quality of life and avoid health issues and addiction, by informing and encouraging people to join social support groups. The essence of the article expresses that using social media creates an improved social and emotional state.

On the contrary, contenders of online networking point out that a major setback to the usage of these sites would result in a distraction, encouraging counterproductivity. Though I concede that at times, social media can draw my attention away from other tasks, I would disagree with the statement that it is hindering our overall productivity. Recent studies have challenged the work of critics who have long assumed that online networking sites were a detriment to society's ability to remain constructive. In fact, "[f]or nearly half (46%) of information workers, using social tools has increased their productivity, while less than one in ten (9%) say these tools have reduced their efficiency, according to a new poll of 9,908 employees across 32 countries conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs on behalf of Microsoft." By focusing on the minor detail that online networking sites can be distracting from time to time, opponents like Rosen and Samuel overlook all of the other aspects and benefits that these sites provide. Readdressing their article, Rosen and Samuel are convinced that we are simply throwing away our time by partaking in useless online interactions. A piece of data in Brad Friedman's article, President of a social media marketing firm, supports Rosen and Samuel's

article in stating that “57% of work interruptions involve ... social tools like [email and social networks], as well as personal online activities such as Facebook...” and that “45% of employees surveyed reported they work only 15 minutes or less without getting interrupted... Doing the math [they’ve learned] for businesses with 1,000 employees, the cost of employee interruptions exceeds \$10 million per year. The actual cost of distraction is even higher in terms of negative impacts on work output, work quality and relationships with clients and co-workers.” Whereas opposers of social media provide ample evidence in regards to this concern, other factors that must be taken into consideration have convinced me otherwise. Can the blame really be placed upon these sites for the corruption of businesses? Could it be that companies are simply hiring ineffective employees? If an employee is not able to control their urges from digital distractions, it is their own fault. Social media sites are made with the intent to be accessible to users, not to distract irresponsible employees and cut company sales.

As we shift our focus on businesses from an individual level to the company as a whole, there are many advantages that can be gained as they are able to inexpensively market their products and offerings to the world in an instant, facilitating new styles and trends in the marketplace. Additionally, non-profit organizations and charitable institutions can also utilize social media sites to raise awareness for a cause, encouraging individuals in our society to create a social change and contribute to the community. Earlier this year, for example, I participated in a service project on behalf of the Lupus Foundation for my marketing class. It was an online marketing campaign to raise awareness for Lupus, a chronic and prevalent autoimmune disease. Lupus was one of America’s least recognized major diseases that can vastly impact people’s health. By posting photos on Instagram, Tweeting out information, and encouraging others to share the post with their friends, our class was able to reach out to roughly 3,700 people. Of

those people, 191 were able to engage with the foundation at some level. We were amazed at how far our efforts could reach in a short period of time.

As discussed, the widely growing base for social media sites has elicited many dichotomized speculations. On the one hand, some Americans believe that social media is a hindrance to societal development in that it seems to reduce productivity levels. disperse dishonest news to the public, and kill our social skills with decreased human to human interaction. On the other hand, others acknowledge these sites to promote an increased cohesion of globalized information, uniting people from different parts of the world. I admit and endorse that Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter can be distracting and may contain false information, however I am not fully convinced that these factors prevent our society from being productive altogether. Our population as a whole must recognize and acknowledge that social media represents a tree that is deeply rooted into our everyday lives, and therefore is most likely not going to be eliminated soon. Instead of trying to uproot this tree, we should nourish it and help it blossom so that its benefits can be utilized to its fullest potential. Although the usage of social media sites may be characterized by a few cons like many other concepts, it is outweighed by the advantages it provides to us: keeping us informed, connected, and involved.

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