Cyber-Social Connectedness

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By

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to explore how individuals can create and maintain a social connectedness and a healthy community in a cyber age. With 845 million users now on Facebook, cyberspace has become the new frontier of how we communicate and connect with others. Since the inception of social media as our latest communication tool, cyber-social relationships are becoming more commonplace as the technological revolution charges forth. The fervor with which many people pursue this new technology creates unease, as much research attempts to disprove that genuine relationship cannot develop or be maintained in cyberspace. Through exploring one’s sense of belongingness and feelings of connectedness to the physical and virtual world, the project highlights the importance of how our perception of these virtual relationships shapes our realities.
Cyber-Social Connectedness

Philosopher and psychologist Alfred Adler once said, “We must connect our thought with a continuous active adaption to the demands of the outer world if we are to understand the direction and movement of life” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 106). Since the inception of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, our world is on the frontier of a new era of cyber-social connection to others. The sweeping impact of this new technology has many onlookers leery of the possible ramification of isolating ourselves from in-person human interactions (Palm & Hansson, 2004). However, the evolution of technology will continue on regardless of the position we take. It is the contention of this author to better understand how people perceive their feelings of connectedness and sense of belongingness in cyberspace versus in-person relationships. It is time to share our ideas, thoughts, and feelings regarding social media and new technologies to the public, as well as, engage in dialogue regarding how this will work for us or against us in the future.

Considering the relatively short life-span of cyber-based technologies, it is astonishing that the number of social networking accounts now exceeds the world’s population (Portet, 2011). Social media has changed the psychological impact of our means of communication, as our expectations of how to participate have changed with the evolution of technology (Rutledge, 2010). Thirty-five years ago, the first Apple computers were entering into our homes with dos prompts, and in 1995 the internet was commercialized. From the research it seems clear that as technology continues to evolve, so do our communication methods. Social media is simply about how people use social networking sites and technology to communicate and connect (Rutledge, 2010). If we want to fully understand ourselves and the world we live in, we must find ways to thrive in a world that is continuously being transformed by new forms of technology.
(Christakis & Fowler, 2009). According to Kennan et al. (2008), “as a new generation for whom technology is a regular and common part of the interactive frame of human life and living, it is natural for them to use the technologies that surround them skillfully and in ways that make intuitive sense to them and the networks in which they reside” (p. 14). Cyber-anthropologist, Amber Case (as cited in Anderson & Raine, 2012) agrees stating “the human brain is wired to adapt to what the environment around it requires for survival” (p. 9).

Social media networking is the integration of technology and social integration. Social media implies connection. Social networking sites are designed to encourage social interaction within a virtual environment (Pempek et al., 2009). The purpose of this technology is to share information and to connect with others. Online social networks continue to provide greater access to social situations than previous forms of media (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). They focus less on the technology and more on the interaction (Chan, 2011). Social networking sites provide an easy, manageable way to interact and connect with others, as well as receive feedback which conveys a message that one has been heard (Pempek et al., 2009). Past and present research studies also indicate that online communication is directly linked to time spent in offline relationships and furthermore, can facilitate offline social interaction (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). The original purpose of Facebook was to encourage social interaction among college students, primarily with friends with whom they had a pre-established offline relationship (Pempek et al., 2009). This seems to support research which indicates that those who choose to engage in social networks tend to have characteristics similar to those of their online friends, just as they would their offline friends (Crandall et al., 2008). Valkenburg & Jochen (2007) indicate that online communication is positively related to the closeness of friendships for those who primarily communicated online with existing friends.
However, not all research supports such claims. Some studies suggest that social media and social networking sites do not necessarily render closer offline relationships (Pollet et al., 2011). There are several studies that indicate that social networks promote weak tie relationships rather than building strong relationships (Rosen, 2007). Gladwell (2010), a leading voice in this argument believes that social media may make it easier for individuals to express themselves online, but it is because of weak tie connections that make their expression difficult to have any impact. Social networking sites have created a hazy argument for in-person human relationships. The virtual and physical world becomes blurred when one spends more time in virtual relationships rather than spending time engaged in face-to-face relationships. According to Jones (2011), virtual relationships are also not as reliable as in-person relationships and people often find it difficult to turn the virtual relationship into a tangible one. The notion of public friendship is an ‘oxymoron’, according to Rosen (2007), who states that “friendship depends on mutual relations that are concealed from the rest of the world within the boundaries of privacy”. Social media conveys the message of public friends in which little to no privacy exists for friendship to take place.

This shift in communication and the way we connect with others has presented concerns to many people. One concern, which is a focus of many studies, is the notion that we are losing our human connection to one another in this cyber age. The worries that this new virtual reality cannot compare to our face-to-face in-person relationships sits at the forefront of this debate among many. Environments are being created where people are linked continuously through technology to other humans (Anderson & Raine, 2012). Research indicates that “despite the hyper-connected era of Facebook friends and Blackberry messaging, social isolation is on the
rise” (Harmon, 2012). This aligns with MIT Professor Sherry Turkle’s (2011) research, in her book *Alone Together*, in which she writes social networks are poor imitations of the real world and therefore, social media is isolating us from interacting with real friends. Some worry that as a result of using these new technologies and social media, people may become more isolated and substitute less meaningful relations for real social support. Pew Internet research disagrees finding that the average user of social networking sites had closer relationships and were half as likely to be socially isolated than those not connected in cyberspace. (Hampton et al., 2011). “In this era of spatially dispersed community, the Internet fills needs for additional interpersonal contact that supplement in-person and telephone contact” (Wellman et al., 2001, p. 22).

Another concern is that social media can reduce a person’s motivation and decrease productivity because it generates constant distraction (Anderson, & Raine, 2012). Other research concurs stating that “social media can distract from deep reflection as individuals respond to frequent interruptions and collaborative production methods” (Schneiderman et al., 2011, p. 25). According to Gladwell (2010), “social networks are effective at increasing participation by lessoning the level of motivation that participation requires”. Rosen (2007) accepts this argument stating that people using social media seem to “favor interaction of greater quantity but less quality”.

In spite of these concerns, there are many advantages to using social media and new technologies. One advantage of social media is that a person only needs a device such as a computer and an internet connection to keep in touch with people around the world. This helps create a “sense of security and continuity in one’s life” (Catarescu, 2010, p.82). Since cyberspace provides a continuous presence, it has the ability to strengthen family ties (Brown, 2011). A Mayo clinic (2010) study reveals that social networking sites not only help a person
stay connected with friends and family but can increase one’s sense of belonging, self-worth, and feelings of security. The definitions of relationships and families are also shifting because people spend more social and leisure time online (Brown, 2011). “Especially for young people, relationships made in virtual space can be just as powerful and meaningful as those formed in the real world” (Brown, 2011, p.30). Social Media has become a natural tool of expression with today’s youth and is a large part of American culture’s social movement. Teenagers and adolescents actually prefer sharing their real life challenges through cyber-space rather than sharing them face to face with their family and friends (Street-Porter, 2007). Research indicates that “socially anxious respondents perceived the Internet as more valuable for intimate self-disclosure than did non-socially anxious respondents, and this perception in turn led to more online communication” (Valkenburg & Jochen, 2007, p. 268).

In addition, those who use today’s technology are no longer limited by time and space or method, making the path towards connection much simpler than in the past (Thackery & Hunter, 2010). As a result, according to Brown (2011), “people are using social media to find others with whom they share important affinities, ranging from genomes to beliefs in lifestyle choices” (p. 31). New technology and social media connects people globally, fostering relationship between people who might not otherwise meet. Geography no longer hinders our connections to others as the boundaries are limitless in virtual space (Catarescu, 2010, p.82). Research indicates that social media is useful for keeping in touch with friends and family who are geographically and socially dispersed. However, Wellman et al. (2001) indicates in their research that “distance still matters … as communication is lower with distant than nearby friends” (p. 19). Social media is also blind to skin color, age, and socio-economic status. The safety of such virtual connection can reduce self-consciousness and foster community (Wang et al, 2011).
However, safety also plays an integral part on the opposing side. Social media can be used to harm others and illegal activities can happen in the virtual world. With little to no regulation over cyber-space individuals are free to post and voice their opinions, to spread rumors, issue rude commentary, and participate in sexting and cyber-bullying (O’Keefe, & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). It is often difficult to understand the purpose behind behaviors that seem disadvantageous to society as a whole. Yet, these cyber-dysfunctional behaviors do unfortunately exist within society, and consequently are becoming a part of our everyday reality. The advantages and also the dangers of using social media as a platform are firmly connected to how we choose to use it (Cartarescu, 2010).

People are also using new technology and social media for business and educational purposes. “With public institutions dealing with dwindling budgets and laid off workers trying to expand their skills, online education seems a natural, inexpensive fit” (Greer, 2010, para.4). A recent online analysis reveals that students who participate in hybrid education, those that blend online classroom education with face to face classroom education, outperform students who participate in either area solely (Shea, & Bidjerano, 2011). Many companies are promoting their employees to attend virtual webinars instead of lengthy and expensive travel to conferences, where they would obtain similar information. Scientist Michael Wu (2012) believes that this is a great benefit to many companies as webinars are more accessible than traditional conferences.

Another area that seems to be making headlines today is the ability for those who use social networks to participate in various types of social action. According to Wellman et al. (2001), “the internet both supplements and increases organization involvement” (p. 444). Technology has allowed society to lower the barrier to action as anyone who is willing to participate is afforded that opportunity. “Simple tools like Facebook and Twitter, through
passionate individuals, build networks of individuals and take action to the street” (Kanalley, 2011). These social media technologies “facilitate remarkably diverse and broad participation while accelerating the formation of effective collaborations” (Schneiderman et al., 2011, p. 25). While Rosen (2007) agrees that virtual networks have the ability to expand our opportunities to meet others, they also have the ability to devalue one’s capacity for ‘genuine connection’.

However, “providing opportunities for youth to successfully participate in social change, giving them a voice, and be involved in civic affairs may develop a generation of youth who carry these skills into adulthood” (Thackery & Hunter, 2010, p. 578).

In lieu of the divided research on social media, research seems to indicate that one’s view of social media is shaped by how others choose to engage in this new technology, as well as, our own choices in engagement. According to Rutledge (2011), “things don’t have to happen like they did in the past to be powerful, valid, or effective”. How we connect to others, access information, and obtain knowledge has forever changed. The generation of today is coming up with new ideas and new solutions for our world problems. Social media has the potential to be a powerful tool when used appropriately. Rather than allowing technology to change people’s social and psychological reality, people change their use of technology to facilitate the creation of their desired social and psychological reality (Tyler, 2002). Research fellow in the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, Barry Chudakov (as cited in Anderson & Rainie, 2012), states that by 2020, “Technology will be so seamlessly integrated into our lives that it will effectively disappear” (p. 5). Beginning stages of this integration are already occurring according to Valkenburg & Jochen (2007) who state that online and offline contacts, because of available technologies allowing constant contact, now increasingly overlap.
Director of the Social + Media Centre, Alexandra Samuel (as cited in Anderson & Rainie, 2012) gives advice in a recent interview with Pew Internet Research:

> If we can stop fretting about what we’re losing we can make room to get excited about what we’re gaining: the ability to multitask, to feel connected to ‘strangers’ as well as neighbors, to create media unselfconsciously, to live in a society of producers rather than consumers, she said. The question we face as individuals, organizations, educators and perhaps especially as parents is how we can help today's kids to prepare for that world—the world they will actually live in and help to create—instead of the world we are already nostalgic for (p. 16).

According to Alfred Adler, “we have always to reckon with others, to adapt ourselves to others, and to interest ourselves in them” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p.132). When social media is viewed as a positive concept, individuals are better equipped with an opportunity to build and strengthen their connections and communities (White, 2011). The core of what makes us human is to connect deeply and to feel a strong sense of belonging. The purpose of this project was to explore how one’s sense of belongingness and feelings of connectedness to the physical and virtual world are connected to the way we perceive social media and modern technologies. Exploring these areas will enhance our understanding if we can create and maintain a social connectedness and a healthy community in a cyber age.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were mental health and social service professionals attending the 2012 Minnesota Social Service Association conference in Minneapolis. Presentations, summaries and times were listed in the conference agenda for all those in attendance. Those who participated in
the cyber-social connectedness presentation voluntarily chose to do so by personal selection. There were 45 adult participants in attendance ranging in various levels of knowledge regarding new technologies and social media.

**Material and Procedure**

Participant’s personal cell phones were used as an introductory tool. Visual aids included a Prezi slideshow, an overhead projector, and a Youtube video clip. Packets with talking points and areas for note taking were distributed to each participant upon their arrival. A princess corded touch tone phone helped to demonstrate how technology has advanced.

**Procedure**

A live presentation and workshop on Cyber-Social Connectedness at the 2012 Minnesota Social Service Association (MSSA) conference in Minneapolis brought research to life through discussion and feedback from participants. The purpose of the presentation was to foster conversation and dialogue on social media and to gain an understanding of peoples’ perceptions of connection and belonging in the virtual versus the physical world. The presentation drove a fairly large crowd at the MSSA conference with participants arriving with their own ideas about social media and if we are truly a connected society. To gain a sense of the room and people’s knowledge and use of technology, participants were asked to bring out their cell phones to be used in an experiential activity. As an introduction, participants were given the task to find specific photos on their cell phones and share them with another participant as an introduction. The task was to search for a photo of one of the following: a pet; a family member; outdoor scenery; or something that represents them or the place in which they live. Upon completion of the activity participants were asked to share their own experience as the sharer of the activity and
feelings connected to that experience. They were then asked to share their experience as the receiver of the information and feelings connected to that experience.

A Youtube video clip of social media in 2012 was shown to direct participants focus to user statistics. This was followed by a Prezi slideshow with intermittent talking points throughout the presentation to elicit dialogue. The four talking points throughout the presentation were: how do you know you are connected?; how do you belong?; what are the advantages and disadvantages of using social media in mental health and social services?: who can and cannot benefit?; and the new normal. During the second talking point of ‘how do you belong’, a guided imagery exercise was facilitated to take a deeper look into oneself to increase participants’ depth of their feelings around their sense of belonging.

Results

The experiential cell phone activity lightened the mood of the room as just moments before, the room moderator had asked participants to turn all cell phones off. Participants laughed as they were told to bring their cell phones back out and turn them on, increasing the comfort level of the sharing experience. Once everyone was given their task of finding photos to share, the room filled with a hum of conversation. After several minutes, participants were asked to share their experience as the sharer of the activity and feelings connected to that experience. A female participant mentioned that it felt more personal as there was some discussion around the photos. Another female participant mentioned that she liked the activity but was a little embarrassed that she actually kept some of the photos on her phone. The laughter of agreement filled the room giving a sense of inclusion, warmth, and connection as we continued on with the presentation and discussion.
Participants were then asked to share their own personal experience as the receiver of the information and feelings connected to that experience. A female participant stated that the interaction felt warm and genuine. A male participant commented that it made it easier to start dialogue with the other person as they now had something to talk about. Another female participant stated that this made the person she just met feel like ‘more than’ just an acquaintance, as she could visually see and ‘touch’ something personal about the other person’s life. Comments from participants were all positive and everyone agreed that they were engaged and felt the activity was a positive way to meet someone.

Participants were then asked why they carried around photos on their phones, if it is simply just a phone. A female participant said it was comforting to carry around photos of her family. A male participant mentioned that he carries his photos around similar to how he once carried photos in his wallet. To drive the point further, a corded princess touch tone phone was shown to participants reminding them of the types of phones that existed prior to cordless technology. When asked if anyone still had a corded phone in their home, not one participant raised their hand. It was pointed out that our cell phones are a part of social media and networking today and that the evolution of technology frees us from cords and walls.

**Talking Point 1: How do you know you are connected?**

Studies indicate that our virtual relationships have an influence over us, just as our face to face relationships have an influence over us. This led to talking point one posing the question, ‘how do you know that you are connected’. Response feedback varied. One female participant mentioned that a person’s body language could indicate that you know you are connected, while another female participant mentioned that having a shared history with another made them feel a sense of connection. A male participant affirmed that he was connected to others around shared
interests. Participants were then asked the feelings that surrounded knowing that they were connected to another. A female participant mentioned that she felt happy around those where there was connection. Another female participant stated she felt complete as she was comforted by a sense of familiar. A male participant stated he felt cared about and he could count on people when he felt connected.

Participants were then asked to consider if they had ever been face to face with a person and felt disconnected? A female participant stated that she often felt disconnected with others she was face to face with upon first meeting them. A male participant mentioned that he feels disconnected to someone when they seem distracted or lack eye contact. An additional female participant stated that she felt a sense of uncertainty about the other person.

To bring forth a social media perspective, participants were then asked if they had ever felt connected to another person through an online social network? This question brought about a considerable dialogue among the group. Several participants mentioned that social media had allowed them to feel more connected to loved ones and family that lived at a distance. One female participant mentioned that she was able to see her grandchild through Skype and this technology made the experience of being connected more real. Another female participant mentioned that social media had allowed her to feel connected to her husband while he was overseas in the military. Social media also allowed her to establish a connection, as well as, build a relationship between their young child with his military father. The most interesting response came from a hearing impaired gentleman in the front row who stated, through an interpreter, that social networking sites such as Facebook have allowed him to feel connected to past relationships and have the ability to have conversation through typed dialogue as well as photo sharing. These questions helped to drive the point that not all face to face meetings equal
connection, just as all virtual meetings do not equal disconnection. The reality may be that we are not more connected in the virtual world. However, if our perception of the experience tells us that we are connected, then it is these perceptions that shape our reality.

**Talking Point 2: How do you belong?**

Psychologist and philosopher, Alfred Adler believed that as social being we all have a most basic goal to belong. He believed that although heredity and environment have strong influences over us as human beings, we are mostly able to make our own choices of how we use heredity and environment as well as how we choose to belong.

Through a guided imagery exercise participants were led to a relaxed state of picturing their day to day activities as well as their interactions with others throughout the day. Participants were asked how they know they belong. Responses were similar. A female participant stated that she felt a sense of belonging when she was in a relationship with others where she felt as if they shared similar values and beliefs. A second female participant shared that she felt a sense of belonging in situations where she felt included. A male participant stated that he felt a sense of belonging in situations where his thoughts and opinions were valued by others.

Participants were then asked if it was necessary to be face-to-face with another person to feel as if they belong. This question sparked more dialogue with mixed feelings on the subject. One female participant stated that she did not feel that it was necessary but it would be better if it could be a face to face relationship as body language and eye contact were important. A male participant disagreed saying that with his busy travel schedule he did not often have an opportunity to be face-to-face with peers, and social media has helped him to feel a sense of belonging from a distance. Another female participant mentioned that social media could benefit
those who live in rural areas as online communities could allow them to find a place where they could fit in.

**Talking Point 3: What are the advantages and disadvantages of using social media in mental health and social services? Who can and cannot benefit?**

Whether it is to serve us or to harm us, the advantages and dangers of social media are strictly connected to how we choose to use it. This talking point prompted more dialogue and engaging conversation. One female participant mentioned that it certainly would be beneficial to rural residents who could access resources and information that they may not be otherwise able to easily obtain. A male participant stated that social media could help to decrease the stigma of mental illness. Another male participant stated that social media was changing the way he communicated with his clients, including scheduling appointments. A female participant agreed that social media was also changing the way she communicated with her clients, as well as, others that she worked with. She mentioned that it was becoming easier to communicate with other mental health professionals on her team allowing her quicker access she may need regarding clients.

**Talking Point 4: The New Normal**

The future is mobile, social, visual, and virtual. These characteristics are moving into our culture. Collaboration is no longer about a destination. It is becoming customizable. Participants were asked to consider what this means to them personally and professionally. There was an interesting discussion on how professionals in social services will use technology, not only for themselves but to benefit their clients. A female participant mentioned the challenges she faces with teenagers she works with and how they communicate in this virtual world as it seems to take away some of their interpersonal skills. This prompted a discussion on increasing
our own knowledge in the world of social media so we can take our discussions to parents as well as teachers.

Another female participant mentioned that social media provides her with access to webinars which she enjoys which have allowed her more time with clients and less on travel. This comment was met with opposing views from two participants. Several other participants agreed sharing that they enjoyed webinars as it took very little time out of their busy lives to attend such an event. A female participant mentioned that her place of employment no longer sends employees away to conferences, due to the expense, and now uses webinars as a replacement. She did not feel as if she obtained the information she wanted in this format. A male participant agreed with her and added that he did not feel connected to webinar formats as he felt that the discussions were one sided and he was unable to ask questions for further feedback from the speaker.

Discussion

Social media has the ability to connect and engage people; affording participation opportunities for all those willing to partake in its domain. Our society continues to become more visual, virtual, and mobile. As these characteristics continue to move into our culture, we cannot underestimate the impact social media is having on society. As a society we are continually adapting to advancing technology. Although this new communication tool has created a wave of societal controversy, we must not discount the stir that this global phenomenon of today’s social media has created. As a fairly new communication tool that continues to rapidly change, the one area that plays a key role in our discussion around this topic is how we choose to use this technology. This question generated much dialogue as a talking point at the conference. As a group of participants who provide services in the mental health and social
service field, we are in a position to direct dialogue with our clients to create understanding, guidance, and education around these new technologies. Those who work in social services will have clients that use social media because it gives them the ability to investigate, connect, collaborate, and find answers.

Research on social media is divided: greater connection versus greater isolation. Whichever side we take, one must recognize that social media is here and has the potential to be a powerful tool when used appropriately, as well as, has the ability to connect and engage people. In a society where individuals’ lives are becoming busier as we fill what remaining free time we have left; social networking allows us to feel more connected. The reality may be that we are not more connected. However, if our perceptions tell us that we are more connected and gives us a sense of belonging, then it is these perceptions which will shape our realities. Online social media will continue to dominate our communication activities for the near future.

Whether we choose to embrace these new communication techniques or resist them is our choice, but the world will continue to progress regardless of a single person’s actions and instead, favor the masses. There are definite challenges to taking our conversations regarding the social media movement and moving them to real action and outcomes. It takes courage to drive such change. However, the opportunity exists. What we do with the opportunity is up to us!
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